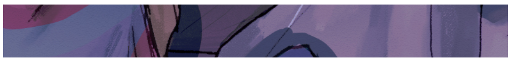
Dreaming of Her

A Shadow &
Maria fan zine

Foreword 3
Mod team 4
Contribuitors 5
Seville 14, 15
EmeraldHavoc 16
Just the Two of Us by Lulu 17
Blingee 33
Coropuchino 35
Quinn (Catgirlweed) 36
Losttimpactt 37
HyrbidShadowz 38

Index



Her Light Shines On by Ultimate Shiruba 39
Nopedog 49
Kira (Rilcornet) 52
Ken 52
Kislu 55
TikkTukk 58
Nanmeo 53
Spring After All by Windii 58
Printables by Nimue (Ribbunskull) 71
Acknowledgements 72

Foreword

It has been a long time coming, but it's finally done! Welcome to "Dreaming of Her" a Shadow & Maria zine! This zine was planned to be much longer, but I think we've hit a good spot for our very first zine.

Due to life happening, getting and losing jobs, the zine was delayed multiple times. I've contemplated leaving the team, and I'm definitely writing this the a few minutes before the set deadline. But! I'm actually really happy with how it turned out! Everyone's work is really beautiful, intricate and well crafted. They all hold a very special place in my heart.

Much like Shadow and Maria. I've been a fan of Sonic since ever since I was a little baby, so naturally, Shadow the Hedgehog shaped my personality. After the announcement of the 3rd Sonic Movie, my passion for the Sonic franchise was reignited. Which brought me to get to know wonderful people like Leon, who brought me into the zine.

Even with all the trials and tribulations, I'm really happy with how it turned out. Hopefully we will have a chance to develop a different zine next time. We promise we won't delay that one.

— Candy, Graphic Designer

Mod Team

Leon

Head organization

Windii

Writing and organization

Natchmaren

Organization Assistant

Candy

Graphic Design and cover illustration

(thank you to my girlfriend for helping me with colors!)

Tsuki

Assistant

Contribuitors

EmeraldHavoc

Graphic designer, illustrator, arts and crafts enjoyer.

From the moment I discovered the Sonic franchise as a kid, Shadow has been my favorite character. His relationship with Maria and the tragedy of their separation drew me in. As an older sister, I relate to the drive to protect your sibling and wish to spare them from hardship. With my piece, I wanted to reflect my own relationship with my brother in Maria and Shadow as they share in their interests and imagination.

@EmeraldHavoc

Blingee

Hobbyist Illustrator

Out of all the relationships in the Sonic franchise, the one between Shadow and Maria is the most singular and impactful to me. Joining this zine was the opportunity to explore a side of their dynamic that I want to see more of ; to get across a sense of ominousness and ambiguity, so that fans of Shadow and Maria can see them represented under a different prism.

@blinguie

Lulu

Writer and hyperfixator

I've been a lifelong fan of the Sonic franchise and have grown a soft spot for the relationship between Shadow and Maria in my adult years. The dichotomy between them can be found elsewhere in media, but there's a specific flavor with them that hits different for me. The interpretation of them in Sonic Movie 3 fascinates me, how it feels like more equal footing between them than the subtle power imbalance of the games, which inspired my piece for this zine.

@looloocool

@fullsupersoniccircle

TikkTukk

Cartoonist and aspiring comic artist.

I always had an interest towards the Sonic franchise as a whole, but could never figure out where or how to start with it. When Sonic Frontiers was released, I quickly realized this was a game that fit my specific gaming style; I absolutely adored it. I immediately jumped head first into the lovely Fandom and all of its media including Sonic X and the IDW comics.

@Tikk.Tukk_

Contribuitors

Nimue

Digital Artist &
Character Designer

I’ve been obsessed with Sonic from a very young age! I grew up playing a lot of Sonic Adventure and Sonic Adventure 2 (I'm obsessed with this one) on the DreamCast with my two older brothers, and my love for these games only became stronger as time passed! The bittersweet nostalgia of being a child and growing up with a sibling inspired my stickers, which I felt like I could finally express after so long, thanks to this zine.

@Ribbunskull
@Ribskull

HybridShadowz

Hobbyist Illustrator

Sonic’s been a big part of my interests since the 2010s. Just something about the little hedgehog and his friends that gave me comfort. And of course Shadow has been my number 1 favorite all these years. I may not be the best gamer around, but Sonic Adventure 2 will always hold a special place in my heart. Seeing the variety of ways fellow artists and writers interpret Maria and Shadow’s dynamics and relationship was so fun to see. Thank you for having me be a part of this lovely zine! (｡>ᴗ<)♡

@HybridShadowz

Quinn

Illustrator

I've been in and out of the Sonic fandom for years but I love the worldbuilding and lore of the series, especially when it comes to Shadow and his backstory! The relationship between him and Maria, as well as the idea of Shadow growing and changing throughout his long life and the way he would be shaped by the relationships he's had deeply inspires me and I loved being able to explore it!

t @catgirlweed

losttimpactt

Hobbyist Illustrator and Character Artist

I've been a Sonic fan for as long as I can remember, but SA2 sealed my fate with Shadow's introduction. I've been in and out of the fandom since then, and 2024's hits dragged me back in deep. I've always loved taking darker topics from "kids" media and exploring it to a greater extent than the source material would be allowed to. Shadow's story as a whole, and especially the tragedy of Maria, has kept me hooked for decades now. It's been awesome seeing a mix of old and new fans come together over our shared love of their relationship!

losttimpactt.carrd.co

Contribuitors

Sevilai

Graphic designer, illustrator, arts and crafts enjoyer.

Lifelong Sonic fan, recently getting back into it proper. I'm an absolute sucker for both sibling relationships and tragedy in media, so needless to say Shadow and Maria's relationship hits wonderfully for me! There's something very cathartic about getting to draw fanart for something you loved as a child now that you're a professional. It's great to get to share in that joy with all the other artists on this project!

@SevilaiDraws

@Sevilai

Kiślu

Hobbyist Illustrator

I'm one of the people who only got into the fandom proper after the third Sonic movie, but once I did it turned into a full blown obsession. I'm honestly sad I haven't gotten into this series sooner! Shadow is obviously my fave, since I have a thing for "dramatic brooding divas" by default, but MAINLY because I find relationships he has with other characters so adorable. I'm a sucker for found families and sibling-like dynamics, so his storyline really got to me - his rivalry with Sonic, friendship and trust in Team Dark and, of course, Maria: the one character whose legacy lives on through it all.

@kislurysuje

Coropuchino

Illustrator and character designer

🦋 ◎ t 🐦

@Coropuchino

In 2017 I played Sonic Forces and Mania, which were my introduction to the franchise and fell in love with it instantly. SA2 was the second 3D Sonic game that I've ever played and it has, since then, a very special place in my heart. I've been struggling with mental health for multiple years and Shadow became like a therapeutic figure that helped me going through my roughest time; his story with Maria brought me in tears the first time I experienced it and, as it continued with Shadow Generation, it kept on inspiring and helping me during my own healing journey. This zine was for me an opportunity to express my love for Maria and Shadow and the hope they kept on giving me.

Ultimate Shiruba

Writer

t @ultimate-shiruba

Sonic has been a part of my life since 2008. While my favourite character is Silver, I have also been drawn quite often to the tragedy of Shadow. His backstory, and almost inspiring ability to find himself able to keep getting back up and finding reason to keep going, even after the reason he existed and most important person in his life was killed by the very humans he must still fight to protect. To me, his is a story of resilience and that despite everything, it is still possible to be a good person, even if we occasionally lose ourselves from time to time. I hope I can do justice to him in this zine, and I am grateful for being able to participate.

Contribuitors

Ken

Freelance illustrator

I only knew the basics about Sonic before but everything changed after I watched the third movie. The impact it had on my life is crazy. I’ve been completely obsessed ever since and all thanks to both Shadow and Maria. Their relationship is really beautiful and bittersweet, something that always warms and aches my heart every time I think about them. Also, you'll find me crying ugly while listening to "The Chosen One" by A2. I’m happy I got to create something about them together with the talented people here. Thank you < 3

@k3n999

Kira

Hobbyist Illustrator

Sonic is the first ever video game I've ever played. I grew to love the series but didn't touch fully until recently with the movie. I always have love siblings dynamic in media so is no surprised that I fell in love with shadow and maria dynamic. I'm happy to create for them and thank you for making them known to this zine (´∀`)

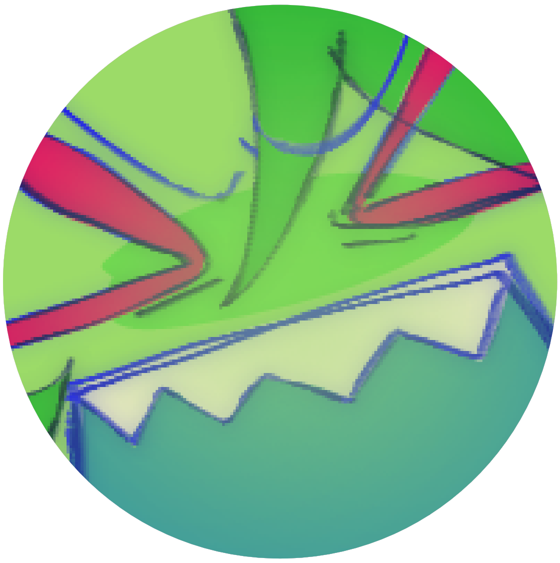
@Rilcornet

Windii

Writer, artist, fansubber

I've been fixated on Shadow and Maria for close to 20+ years now. My interpretation of Shadow's life on the ARK is something along the lines of a beautiful dream—vague, airy, fleeting, nostalgic, a little sad, "just the two of us," etc. Shadow will spend the rest of his life wondering if any of it was real, but long for it anyway. I hope that comes across in my art and writing.

browniehideout.wordpress.com



Nopedog

Illustrator

Im a new gen sonic fan so to speak, i didnt get much into the franchise until the movies dropped and oh my GOD did that change everything, and im happy to say im very attatched to the blue hedgehog and his fun adventures now

@Nopedog_

t @cosmic-nopedog

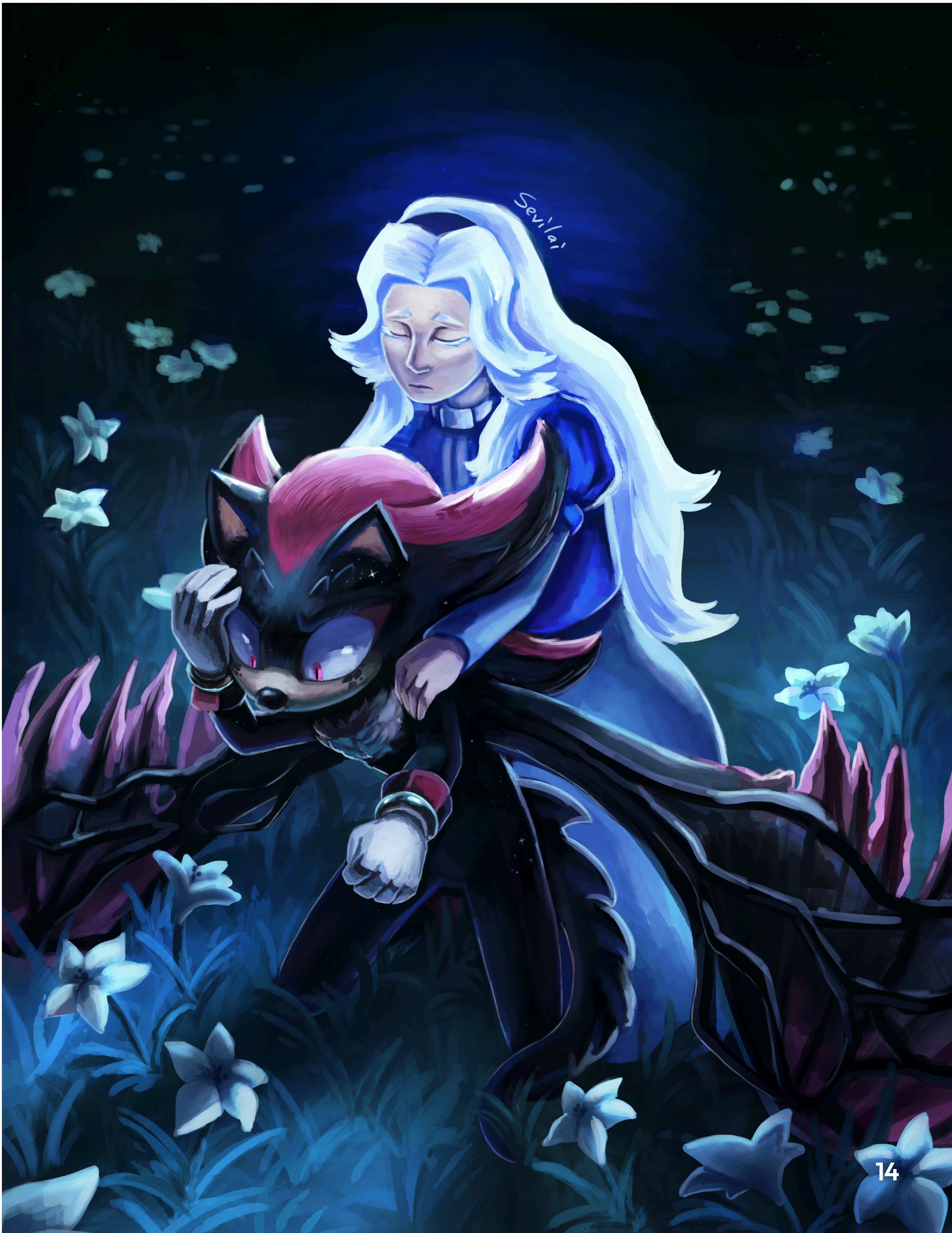
Nanmeo

Illustrator and 3D artist

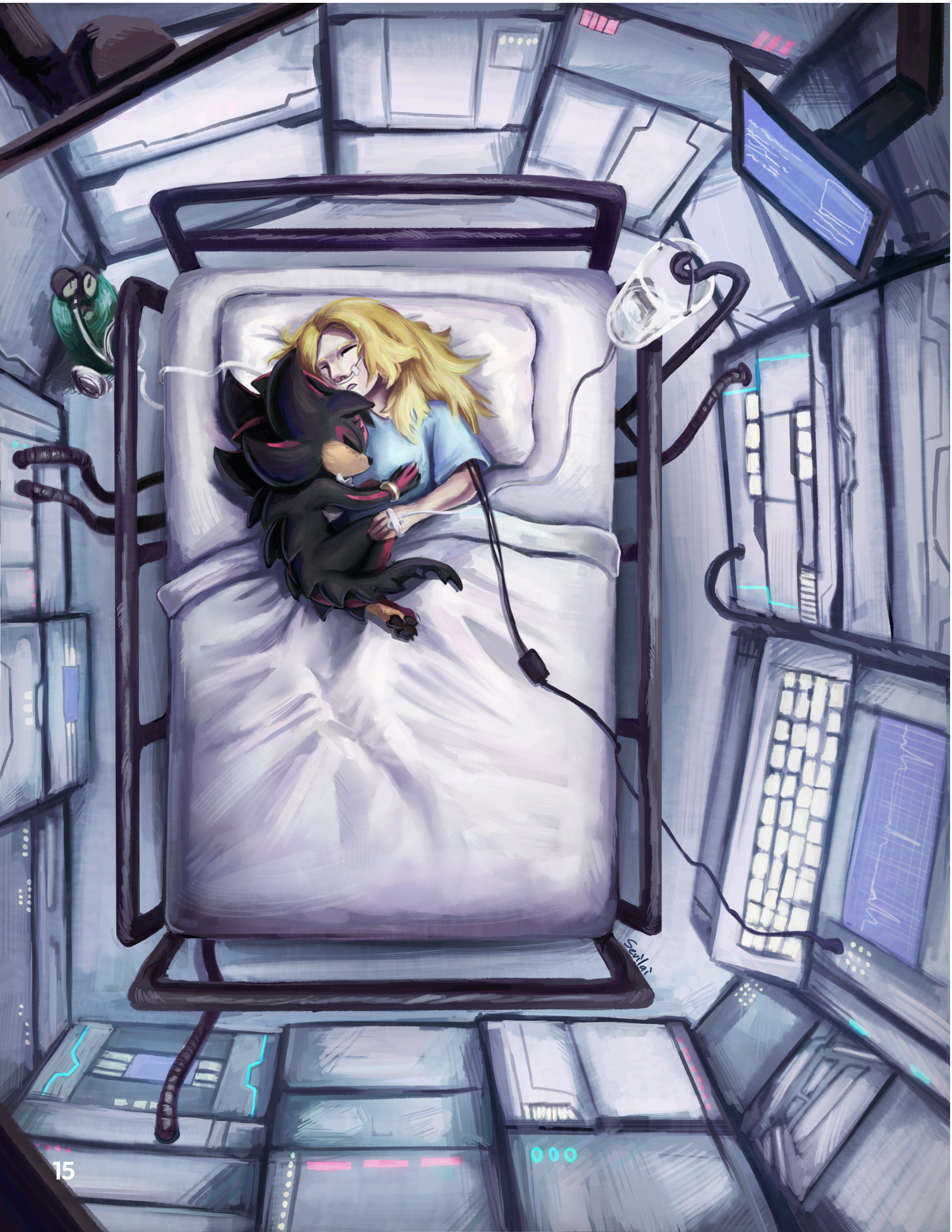
im nanmeo and im a 3D artist by trade that draws a bunch for fun in my freetime! ive been a sonic fan since birth and have literally moved across the continent for that silly hedgehog (i worked on the second movie believe it or not!) i will forever stand by sonic heroes as my first and favorite game especially the team dark route and im super excited to be apart of this and meet cool sonic folks!

@nanmeo

Sevilai



Sevilai



EmeraldHavoc

Just the Two of Us

By Lulu

Shadow had grown used to things happening to him. The humans that were referred to as 'scientists' always had some sort of task that required attaching sensors to Shadow's body, or pressing needles into his skin to inject different liquids or take them out; in that case it was always the green fluid that everybody called his blood. He only ever saw it in glass vials or plastic tubes, so that was probably why he was taken aback the first time he saw it not filling a syringe or blood bag.

It happened during a game of tag with Maria, the two chasing each other through the halls of the military outpost with strict rules of no hiding in rooms and no teleporting to keep it fair. Shadow had honed a knack for the game, utilizing his speed to duck and weave around people and rolling carts to avoid Maria and her pursuit to make him 'it', to the point where he'd claim to be good at it. However, all it takes is one oversight to humble any living being, and Shadow's oversight was a large cable on the floor that was running between two rooms.

The jerk of falling after he tripped, nor the sudden blossom of pain on his leg, didn't compare to how Shadow felt after he looked at his knee, the spot scraped open with dots of green welling up on the surface, then up to Maria as she kneeled down next to him, her brows furrowed and lips in a frown as she looked at him.

"Shadow! Are you okay?"

He couldn't answer, mind reeling as he tried to figure out why Maria had that look on her face, and was prevented from responding as one of the scientists nearby rushed over and kneeled down too, a similar frown on his face,

“Hold still, let me have... a...”

The human trailed off as he stared at Shadow’s knee, prompting him to look as well, confused when he saw that the green blood that had pooled over the wound had now hardened into a thick, dark green, blob instead. It reminded the alien of what was on Maria’s knuckle from scraping it against a grater yesterday, when the two of them had snuck into the kitchen to cook an early lunch. It had taken a while for what she had called a ‘scab’ to form, but the one on Shadow’s knee had already solidified and was now curling up at the edges.

Shadow reached a hand out to it, the scientist making a delayed noise like he wanted him to stop, and poked a finger at the scab, the hard mass easily dislodging at the touch. He grabbed at it and pulled it away, and all three were greeted with not torn skin and raw flesh, but an unblemished surface and the fuzz of black fur growing over tan skin.

Maria was the first to react, leaning in closer to look at Shadow’s knee before looking up at him, awe in her voice as she spoke,

“Whoa! Did you know you could do that?”

The hedgehog shrugged, looking at his hand that still held the scab.

“I’ve never been injured before, so no. I had no control over any of this.”

In an instant the scab was grabbed from him and was sitting in a tissue on the scientist’s hand, the human’s eyes flicking between it and Shadow’s healed knee.

“This is remarkable!”

Just as quickly as the scab had been taken, Shadow was pulled up to stand on his feet, the scientist pressing a hand to Shadow’s back and pushing him down the hall,

“Come now, we need to show this to the Professor right away!”

Shadow didn’t even have the chance to try and protest what was happening before they were going around the bend, the only thing he could do was look back towards where Maria was, now standing and watching after him, wearing that same look from before that made Shadow immediately look away.

Everybody was amazed by what had happened, the scientist who witnessed it recounting the event and bringing up the hallway security footage to prove it, and most impressed of them all was Professor Gerald. The older human asked Shadow the same question Maria had, Shadow gave the same response, and that was the last of anybody speaking directly to him.

For the rest of the day Shadow was kept in the lab, stuck sitting on the table they always put him on with the cushion that wasn't as comfortable as the humans said it was, watching everyone move around him.

One group drew blood from him then huddled over machines on the far side of the room, another led by the Professor took one of his quills that was about to fall off, along with another blood draw, and went to the other far side of the room. At one point he was ferried into an adjacent room they had used once before to take x-rays, except this time he had to keep his arm still for an IV of warm fluid that was required for the pictures. He was ordered to drink water while they huddled around the lit up x-ray images, whispering amongst themselves, before seemingly remembering Shadow was still there and allowing him to finally leave the lab.

There was no sign of Maria waiting outside, meaning a scientist was able to usher Shadow to the room that he was supposed to sleep in rather than the blanket fort he normally ended up under, claiming it was late and the hedgehog needed uninterrupted sleep. After the door shut, it was just Shadow, a cot across the room, and the light buzzing on the ceiling.

A part of him considered teleporting out to go find Maria, wishing for her company after having spent the last few hours with everybody in the lab talking and working over his head, but he hesitated when he remembered the look he last saw on her face. Usually Maria would look at him with kind eyes and a smile, or eyes full of mischief while grinning in jest, but earlier her eyebrows were pinched and drawn in, and the corners of her mouth turned down.

It was the kind of look he had just seen on everybody's faces in the lab, poring over all the tests they did on him, the brief glances in his direction only to dart away when they saw him watching. Trying to understand what they were seeing, making sense of the results before their eyes, only to change the second they turned around and saw him into looks of-

Shadow ended the thought before it could finish, turning off the light to the room before trudging over to lay on the cot, pulling the blanket up and over his body. He shut his eyes and forced his mind to become blank, knowing tomorrow he'd get to see Maria and ask her then why she'd had that look on her face.

At the very least, tomorrow would be better than how today had ended.

…

Loud knocking woke Shadow up the next day, the scientist who had done it sweeping him off back to the lab, the hedgehog becoming worried when again he saw no sign of Maria on the way.

In the lab, Shadow found his breakfast, a tray with a serving of whatever the kitchen made (today it was quiche, his least favorite meal on account of the random food he'd have to pick out to eat the eggs), a small plastic cup filled with an assortment of vitamin pills he had to take (he wished he could have the one chewable 'Flinstones' vitamin Maria took instead), and a glass of milk to wash it all down with (at first he was impartial to it, but after he got the hot beverage all the scientists drank one time, coffee, Shadow began to dislike milk).

As soon as he was done, the tray was whisked away, and he was ready for the usual routine of having his vitals taken while being told what tests he had to do today. However, to his surprise, all they did was take a blood sample, then left him alone.

Any other time he would have jumped at the chance to run off, but with the events of yesterday and no reassurance of Maria peeking out from over a table, Shadow felt glued to the spot. His eyes darted back and forth between the scientists gathered around a computer to his left and the doors leading out to the hallway on his right, desperate for anything to happen and stop the confusingly empty pit growing in his stomach.

"Shadow, this way."

The hedgehog climbed down from his seat, following a step behind the scientist that had called to him, the foreboding feeling in Shadow growing as he was brought towards a doorway deeper in the lab. Through the doorframe was a brightly lit room with a chair, a cushioned high back reclining one he'd seen the humans use before, and a machine that Shadow had never seen before sitting next to it. It was a big box on wheels, with a large panel covered with many switches and blinking lights, and multiple tubes connecting it to empty bags hanging off of it that Shadow did recognize, the sight of them causing his shoulders to stiffen and making his quills raise on edge.

He took a step back when the scientist turned to him, mouth open mid-sentence explaining something that Shadow didn't hear because of a loud noise muffling his hearing, her eyebrows shooting up and eyes going wide as she finally saw Shadow for what seemed like the first time, maybe ever. He looked between her and the machine, just barely able to hear his own voice past the blood rushing in his ears,

”What are you going to do to me?”

The woman looked behind her, at the room and the unknown machine, then back at him, hands coming together as she gave him a smile that did nothing to ease Shadow.

”Ah, it's a little complex to explain, but it has to do with your blood. The study is still relatively new for the wider science community, but there's been a discovery that we feel you may be pertinent to, and we need your blood to help with it.”

”That doesn't answer my question.”

Her smile faltered for a moment, but she forced it back on as she slightly crouched down, putting her hands on her knees and leaning over Shadow,

”Well, everybody's blood is made up of four things; red blood cells, white blood cells, plasma, and what's important for today, platelets. Through all of our testing, we know your blood is composed of the same things, but are more... productive.”

A hand reached out to lay on his shoulder, the fingers giving a brief squeeze that didn't do much to reassure him.

“Your platelets are very unique, and

the machine in this room is designed to separate and collect them. I'm going to hook you up to it, it'll draw your blood, take out the platelets, then return everything else back to your blood stream."

Shadow suppressed a shiver at the idea of his blood being returned back to him while missing a part of it, debating if he wanted to deal with what would happen if he tried to pull away from the scientist as he continued his questions,

"What will you use my platelets for? Don't I need them?"

Something in her face twitched, and her hand was squeezing him again, longer than before.

"You'll be fine. Besides, we think we can use your platelets to help others!"

The word 'help' was the first thing the woman had said that finally made Shadow's unease start to go away, looking into the room again and the machine, the sight of it still intimidating. Then, he thought of Maria's scraped knuckles, remembering how long the scabs had stayed, then how quickly his injury from yesterday had healed.

"I can help people? Even though I'm not a human?"

The scientist let out a sigh, Shadow looking back at her to see her face relaxed as she answered him,

"Yes, the Professor already performed a trial with the sample we got from you yesterday, and the results were magnificent. He wants to collect a larger sample to continue his study, so he worked all night to get this machine here to use today. All you have to do is sit in that chair, and let the machine do it's work."

Shadow looked back at the room ahead of him, the scientist's words in his mind as he stared down the platelet machine. He still hated the idea of what it was going to do to his blood. However, everything else the scientists and the Professor had done to him had never hurt him, and if all he had to do was sit still for a... weird blood draw to help people, people like Maria...

The scientist took a step into the room, and after a beat, Shadow followed.

...

Maria was used to being alone.

Such a thought was likely confusing to those who knew how doting of a grandfather she had, but despite how adamant he was about having her go everywhere he did, Grandpa still had to do work that kids were advised against participating in. So she was left to find her own entertainment during the long days while Grandpa worked; exploring whatever new military outpost they had just moved to, decorating the living space she and Grandpa shared, and playing with what she had in her personal belongings.

It didn't mean that she liked being alone though, and for that she's glad to have met Shadow.

From the moment Maria caught sight of him in the green glow of that tube, she knew she had met the answer to that loneliness she hated, and became determined to spend every moment she could from now on keeping it away with Shadow's presence.

No experiment, test, or meeting would keep her from finding a way to sneak the hedgehog away so they could race down the halls, watch Star Trek and The Electric Company, or dance around as Elton or Dolly or Bowie sang their music. For good measure, the day couldn't end until they were huddled beneath the permanent blanket fort Maria had made, lights softly glowing above them, while either late night TV or guitar strings filled the air.

That was how her days normally went, until the other day when Shadow fell and scraped his knee.

She was 'it' while they were playing a game of tag when it happened; Shadow racing ahead while turning his head back towards her with a smirk on his face, the large cable stretched across the ground that she knew hadn't been there the last time they lapped through the hall, the same delay in her thinking to shout out a warning like before with the food cart full of cake.

The world slowed down the split second Shadow's foot got caught, and in that split second Maria had watched his confidence turn into shock. Time sped up as he crashed to the floor, a startled grunt coming from him, and a sharp gasp from her.

Maria had nearly stumbled as she hurried to slow down, doing so just in time to get down on the floor after Shadow had sat himself back up, red eyes looking from his bloody knee up to her as she frowned at him in concern.

”Shadow! Are you okay?”

He had only stared at her in response, which was fair with how surprised he seemed at the time, and didn’t get to say anything when one of Grandfather’s assistants came hurrying over to check on them. Maria had meant to reassure Shadow with a smile, but was prevented from following through when she noticed how rapidly Shadow’s knee injury had changed in just a moment, as did the assistant researcher.

“Hold still, let me have... a... “

Before their very eyes, the green blood that had pooled on Shadow’s knee went from liquid to solid, becoming a large scab in less than seven seconds. The memory of it still amazed Maria, she’d never seen any other act like it. She had barely contained herself long enough for Shadow to recognize what had happened and pull off his scab, revealing perfectly healed skin and new fuzzy fur growing back in, looking back up at her friend who seemed equally as surprised as her.

“Whoa! Did you know you could do that?”

The hedgehog had shrugged, looking at his hand that still held the scab, brows furrowed in thought,

“I’ve never been injured before, so no. I had no control over any of this.”

Other questions had come to Maria’s mind, but before she had a chance to even sort through them, Shadow’s scab was taken from him by the scientist, the older man hunching over the hand holding it, eyes wide in awe.

“This is remarkable!”

Just as quickly as the scab had been grabbed, Shadow was pulled up to stand on his feet, the scientist pressing a hand to Shadow’s back and pushing him down the hall,

“Come now, we need to show this to the Professor right away!”

It all happened so fast that all Maria could do was hurry to stand up and watch after the scientist and her friend, worried as she watched Shadow glance back at her before quickly looking away. He had looked really taken aback by the sequence of events, and she had wanted to find him later to make sure he was alright.

However, Maria hadn't seen Shadow once after that, and she was worried. It had been almost a whole twenty-four hours since everything had happened.

Maria tried to ask Grandpa about Shadow last night, but he had arrived back late and refused to talk because he was tired. She had planned to wake up early and ask him before he left this morning, but he was long gone before she could even wipe the sleep out of her eyes. She couldn't even head straight to the lab to get her own answers! One of Grandpa's assistants saw her as soon as she left the living quarters and wouldn't let her slip away. He dragged her off to the kitchen instead and watched her like a hawk while she begrudgingly ate her food. He only left her alone after he got called away by someone else, finally allowing Maria to beeline for the lab, determined to find her friend.

Maria opened the door to the lab, already crouched and ready to crawl around, but was shocked when she looked up at the spot where Shadow would normally be, finding it empty. The only other place he would be is the large room that Grandpa called the 'Energy Extractor', where they made Shadow endlessly lap around while using his power, but it had been empty when she passed it on the way here. Was something new being done today?

Despite the surprise, Maria kept low and crawled inside, making sure to be a little more careful than usual since she had to go deeper into the lab. It was actually kind of interesting to see what else there was inside as she peeked around the tables, but her concern for Shadow kept her from lingering too long trying to figure out what was surrounding her.

After crawling past four tables and nearly getting spotted, Maria noticed an open doorway, the lights in the room inside on and a strange humming sound coming out of it, just barely covered by the research scientists quietly talking a few feet away from her. She triple checked to make sure the coast was clear before she bolted to the room, not even certain she was going to find who she wanted in there. Thankfully her risk paid off, though she hadn't anticipated finding her friend like this.

The hedgehog was sitting in a reclined chair, and next to him was a machine that looked like he was connected to by tubes. Said tubes were filled with green liquid--Shadow's blood--and were attached to both of his arms, ending in needles placed in the crook of his arms. He didn't notice that she had come in yet, his head angled down as he stared at his lap, the sight making Maria wish she had gotten to him sooner.

"Shadow!"

The hedgehog's head shot up after she called out to him, his red eyes landing on her and going wide.

"Maria? What are you doing here?"

She spotted a rolling stool and sat on it, using it to roll across the room and over to Shadow, smiling at him as she came to a stop on his left, doing her best to ignore the slightly unsettling sight of someone's blood being pumped through multiple tubes,

"I was looking for you! What else would I be doing here?"

Shadow's brow furrowed a little at Maria's words before his eyes darted away, her friend shifting in his seat, at least as much as he could while being unable to use his arms,

"You... really did want to see me?"

Maria furrowed her own eyebrows, not sure where Shadow was going with this train of thought.

"Of course I wanted to see you. What made you think I wouldn't want to?"

The hedgehog's head dipped down, his fingers clenching together where he had his hands resting on the arms of his chair, quiet for a moment before he spoke up,

"Yesterday, after I tripped, it looked like you didn't like what you saw me do... you have the same look right now."

Maria was even more confused now, having no idea what the other was talking about, tilting her head down to try and see Shadow's face,

"Well, if you mean that I don't like seeing you get hurt, or seeing you hooked up to a weird medical machine, that's true."

Shadow shook his head at that, but at least he lifted his head enough to look at Maria with a hesitant look.

"I mean my knee, when it healed the way it did. I thought you didn't... like it."

The girl blinked, realizing after a second that he had to be talking about how quickly his healing happened, she was still confused, but now for a different reason,

“No, Shadow, what happened to your knee was really cool! It happened so fast that I was still processing what I’d just seen, then that researcher took you away, and I didn’t get a chance to see you again until just now.”

The hedgehog seemed to balk at her response, lifting his head back up and staring at her with a confused look, brows furrowed and eyes unsure as his voice when he continued on,

“You had the same kind of look that all the scientists make during my tests. I thought you were starting to get... scared of me.”

Maria almost barked out a laugh after hearing those words. There was no way she could ever be scared of her best friend! Despite how ridiculous the idea was to her though, she saw how seriously it concerned Shadow. She had to make sure he’d never get such an idea in his head ever again.

“What? No way! I was worried about you, silly! I know how much scraping a knee hurts, and you looked kind of shocked after it happened too. That’s why I asked after you fell if you were okay, and why I wanted to come see you today.”

Shadow’s face stayed confused, eyes flicking down as he searched for something to say.

“Is being ‘worried’ something good or... bad?”

Maria took a moment to think of how to respond, letting her feet tap on the feet of the stool she sat on while humming in thought. She was always truthful to Shadow, but she didn’t want to stress him out with the definition more than he already was, though this felt like one of those ‘hard truth’ things Grandpa had told her about.

“Well... it depends. To worry means that you’re thinking a lot about something, maybe enough to make you anxious. To me, it can be good, because if somebody worries about me, I know they care about me, and want the best for me. Like you and Grandpa.”

Shadow looked away at that, ears ever so slightly folding down.

"I don't think all the scientists think like that about me."

She held back the sigh she wanted to let out. Adults were so confusing, Maria had no idea why so many of Grandpa's research assistants were so. . . weird about Shadow. Yes, he's an alien, and he has unique powers she had never seen before, but he was still a person. Every time she had gone to get Shadow out of the lab, the adults would either ignore him until they needed to do something, or be overly aware of his presence to the point of it being overwhelming. It was frustrating to see, especially because there's not much she can do to change it. If she brought it up to any adult, all they'd say is that she's 'just a kid' and to 'let the adults handle it'. There was one thing she could do though.

Maria reached a hand out to lay on Shadow's hand, his red eyes moving back up to meet hers, putting on the warmest smile that she could possibly make to smile at him as she spoke from the heart,

"I don't know about those guys or what they think, but what I can tell you is that they don't matter. I worry for you because I care about you. You're my best friend, and best friends only worry because they care about each other. That's how it'll always be, I promise."

Her words seemed to do the trick, and Shadow finally relaxed for the first time since she found him in this room, the hedgehog leaning back in his seat and breathing out his worry. Now that one issue was taken care of, Maria turned to the next one; the machine sitting on the other side of Shadow. It was still humming and the lights were still slowly blinking, continuing to do whatever it was doing with Shadow and his blood. She had seen machines like these over the years at blood drives across all the military bases she'd stayed at, but she'd never seen somebody get attached to two tubes before. She looked back at Shadow, catching the tail-end of him suppressing a shiver.

"Are you giving blood?"

Shadow shook his head, glancing at the machine next to him and the tubes filled with his blood, only to immediately look away and shut his eyes.

Maria could understand the squeamishness, it had to be unsettling to see so much of your blood outside of your body.

"Not exactly. They said something about 'platelets' and that this machine was going to separate it out from my blood."

She looked back at the blood machine, noticing now what looked to be a container filled with something other than green fluid, a pale yellow-ish substance. Maybe that was the platelets?

"Oh... huh. I haven't heard of 'platelets' before."

He opened his eyes, looking down at his legs. "I didn't either until they told me about them, and that mine could help people." He lifted his head to look back at Maria, his red eyes filled with a firm resolve, "If I can help you and other people, then I'll sit here as long as it takes."

Maria smiled at Shadow. Despite coming from somewhere far away, he had a kind heart and was willing to help people, even at his own expense. Even more reasons that those assistants had weird hangups.

"Speaking of, did they say how long it was going to take? And how long have you been sitting here already?"

The hedgehog let out a soft sigh, sinking back into the chair, shivering again and making Maria realize that he must be cold. She remembered feeling similar when she gave blood once.

"No. They just told me what this machine would do and hooked me up to it. I think that was about twenty minutes ago."

Maria furrowed her brow, turning away from the machine. Why nobody said how long the procedure would take will have to be answered another time, but for now she had to figure out some way to cheer Shadow up; from being stuck here against his will, and for sitting for so long while thinking that she had been scared of him.

"Hopefully it won't be much longer... but, if it is, I have an idea."

...

"'You're under arrest.' 'Under arrest? What do you mean? What for?' 'Spreading dissension and inciting to mutiny. Silver, you're under arrest too, for failing to report to Toadflax this evening and causing your duty to devolve on a comrade. You're both to come with me.' "

A huff came from Shadow then, Maria looking up to find the hedgehog making a cross face, although the intensity of it was lessened by the granny square blanket draped over his body and tucked over his shoulders,

“Stupid rabbit. They’re not trying to take over the warren, they’re trying to save everyone from the houses about to be built on it.”

She smiled in understanding, setting the book she was holding in her lap down to switch the current vinyl on her Tele-tone, selecting another forty-five to replace it,

“Holly will eventually understand what they’re trying to do, you’ll see.”

Maria started up the record player, the music playing as she picked up her copy of Watership Down again, finding the line she had stopped at and continuing to read,

“Immediately Bigwig fell upon him, scratching and kicking. Holly fought back. His followers closed in, looking for an opening to join the fight and pin Bigwig down. Suddenly, from the top of the bank—“

“Maria? When did you get in here?”

Her head shot up at the question, she could practically feel how stiff Shadow went next to her, finding one of Grandfather’s assistants standing in the doorway and staring at her in confusion. She sat up a little straighter, trying to look more composed to the adult, enacting Plan A. Grandpa had told her once that if you acted confident, then nobody would question you.

“I think about thirty minutes ago. I came to find Shadow to see how he was doing after yesterday, and decided he needed some company when I saw he was connected to this machine. Do you know how much longer it’ll be until he’s done?”

The assistant stayed confused, her mouth hanging open and eyes squinting as the cogs in her head worked, likely trying to figure out she had missed noticing Maria earlier (just like all the other times before). After a moment the scientist shook herself out of her stupor, recomposing herself and focusing back on Maria,

“I guess we should have figured you’d make a visit.” Her words carried that kind of tone adults take when they don’t want anybody messing around, the kind that Maria found annoying. The older woman held a hand out as she began to walk further into the room, her pace just as brisk as her words, “The fenwal won’t be done for another hour and ten minutes, why don’t I take you to––”

Okay, Plan B then. Maria hoped this wouldn’t happen, but she had prepared for it anyway, immediately moving with the rolling stool she was sitting on to be closer to Shadow, putting on the sad puppy look that she knew worked on Grandpa, but had never tried to use on other people,

“Can’t I stay here? Shadow was all by himself before, I don’t want him to be alone.”

The woman stopped halfway into the room, her eyes moving to Shadow, then back to Maria.

“We’re keeping an eye on him, we just have some other things the Professor wanted us to work on while the platelets are being extracted. I’m sure Shadow would have said something to me if he needed company.”

Maria held back the urge to roll her eyes, instead making her sad puppy look even sadder, bringing her hands up to clasp in front of her in a pleading gesture,

“But he looked really bored and like he needed somebody to sit with him! I couldn’t leave my friend all by himself. Can’t I stay? Please?”

The assistant sighed, raising a hand up to rub at her temple, her clear exasperation either a sign that this was working, or that it wasn’t.

“Maria, I understand Shadow is your friend, but I can’t leave you here unsupervised with such a delicate process going on. How can I be sure you won’t cause an issue by accident? Or that you haven’t already with that blanket?”

“She hasn’t.”

The adult dropped her hand, a surprised look on her face at Shadow speaking up. Maria turned to look at him and smiled, proud as the hedgehog continued on,

“Maria hasn’t tried to touch any part of the machine the whole time she’s been here. She was careful with the blanket too, the alarm that you said would go off if the tubes were obstructed never went off.”

The woman’s eyes flicked between the two of them before she shut them and took a deep breath, letting it out as she raised a hand up to point at them,

“Fine. Maria, don’t move from where you are right now, alright? I’ll be back after the Fenwal is finished. Shadow, do not move until I come back to help remove everything. Do you both understand what I’ve asked?”

They both nodded in response, and with that the assistant finally turned and left, leaving them alone once more. The young girl turned with a grin to her friend, reaching out to put her hand on one of his and giving it a squeeze,

“I told you it would work!”

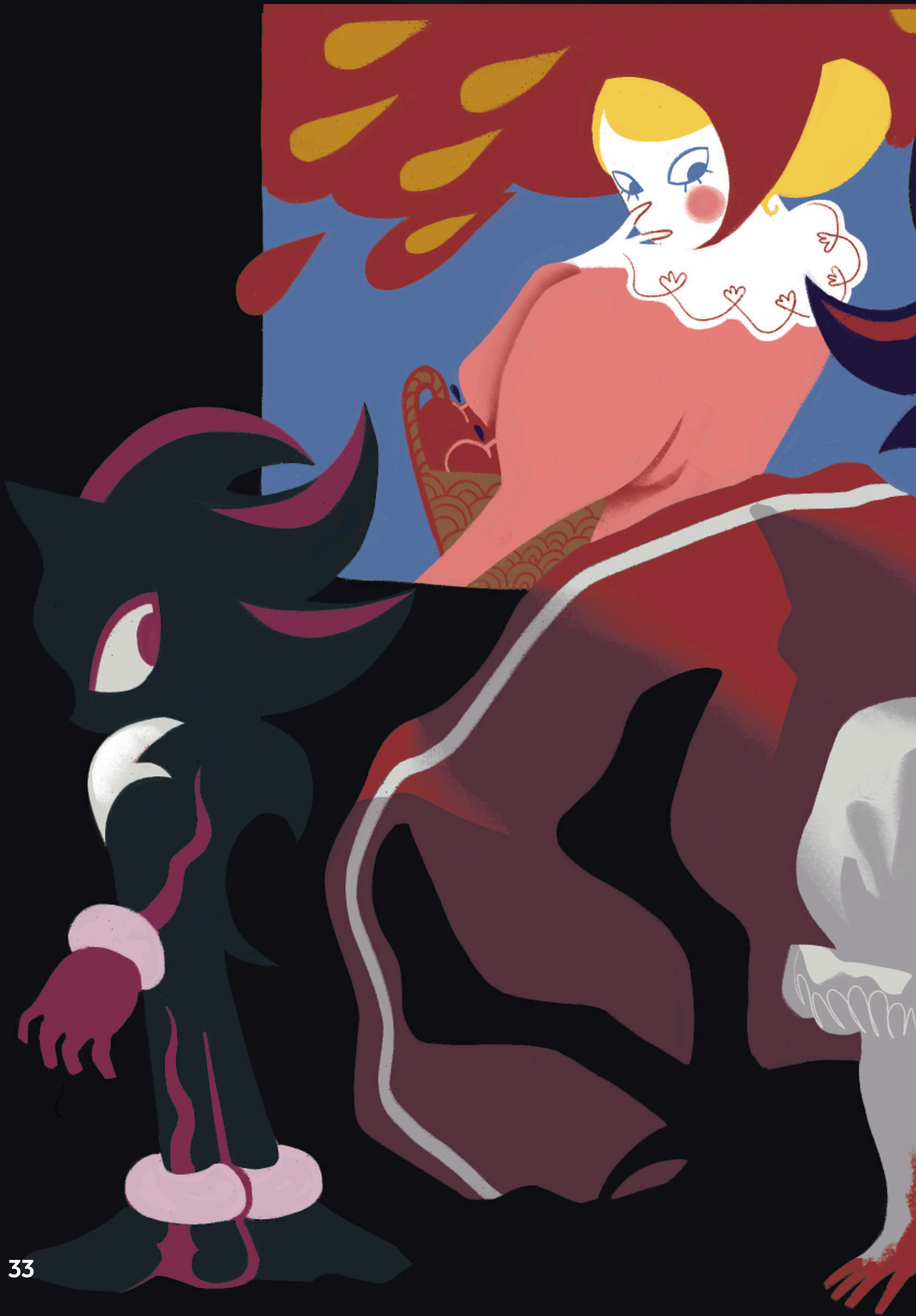
The hedgehog smiled, a sight not often seen that Maria always treasured, shoulders relaxing as he leaned back in his chair,

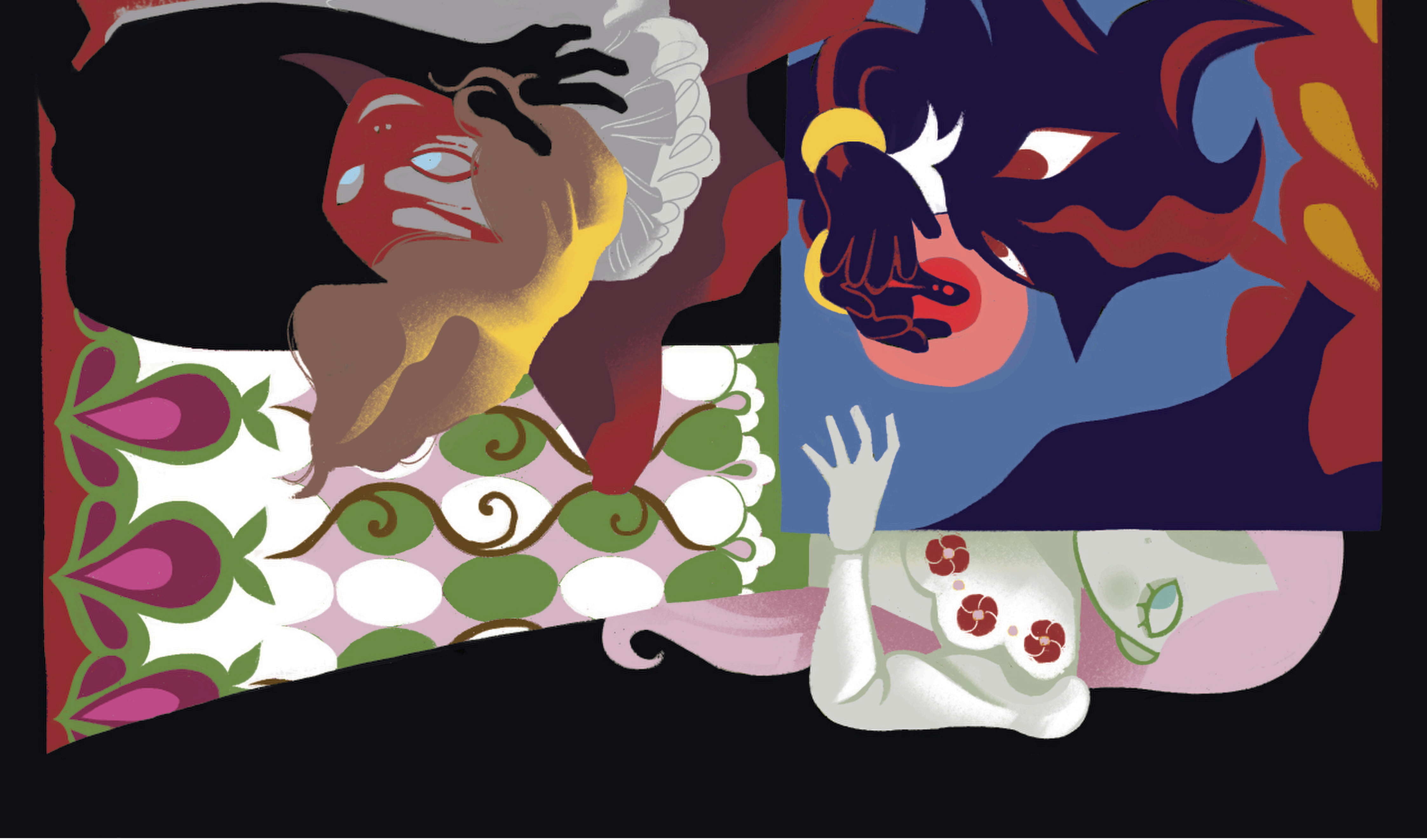
“You still needed a little help to get there.”

She playfully rolled her eyes at him, deciding not to tease him over doubting her plans and going back to continue reading the book in her lap, but looked back up as she felt a returned squeeze of her hand, finding Shadow with a grateful look on his face,

“Thank you.”

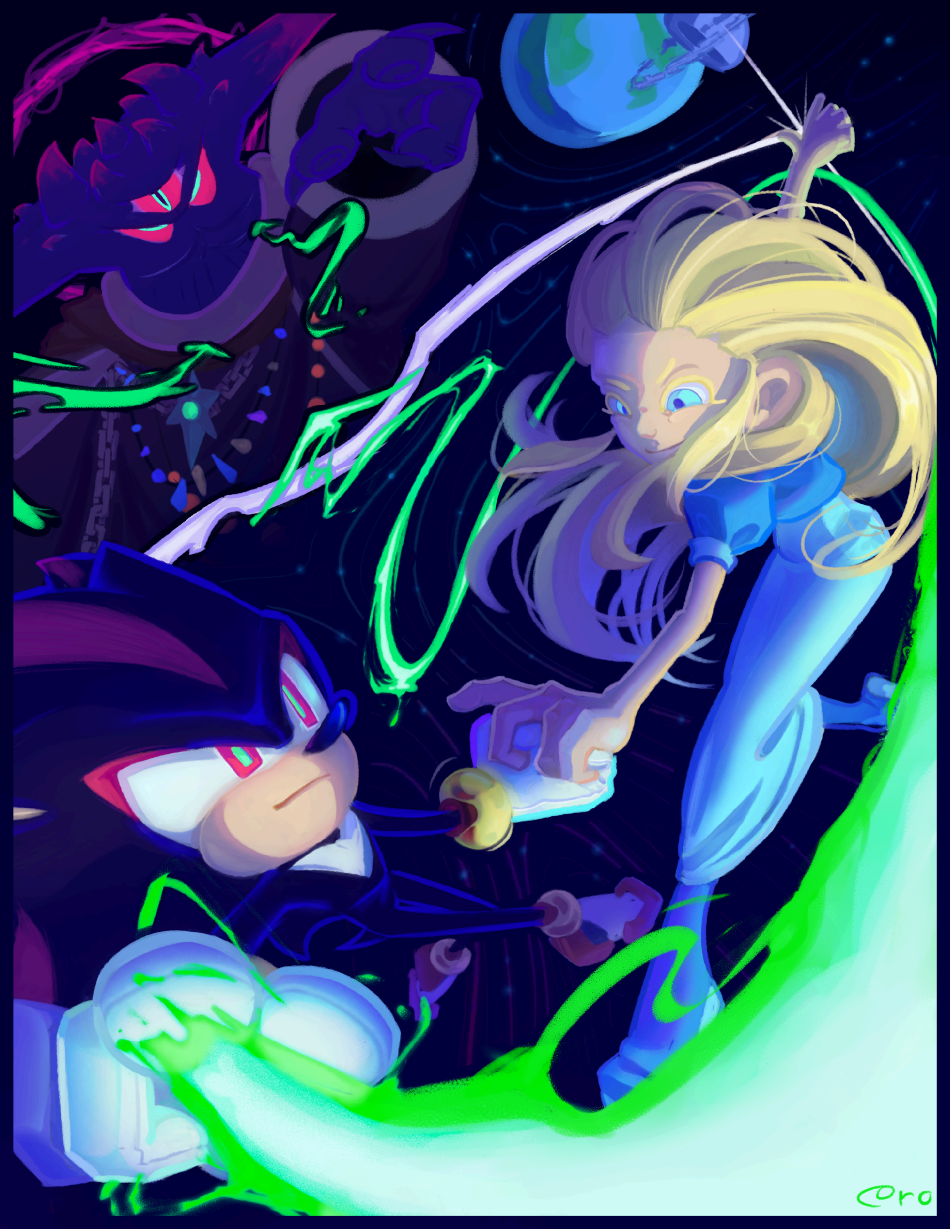
Maria smiled, squeezing Shadow’s hand again, and continuing to hold it as she used her free hand to open the book again, finding where she had left off in the story and reading aloud, her voice rising above the mechanical hum of the machine as she continued the story of the rabbits and their journey to find safety with their pack in a new home.





Lifeblood

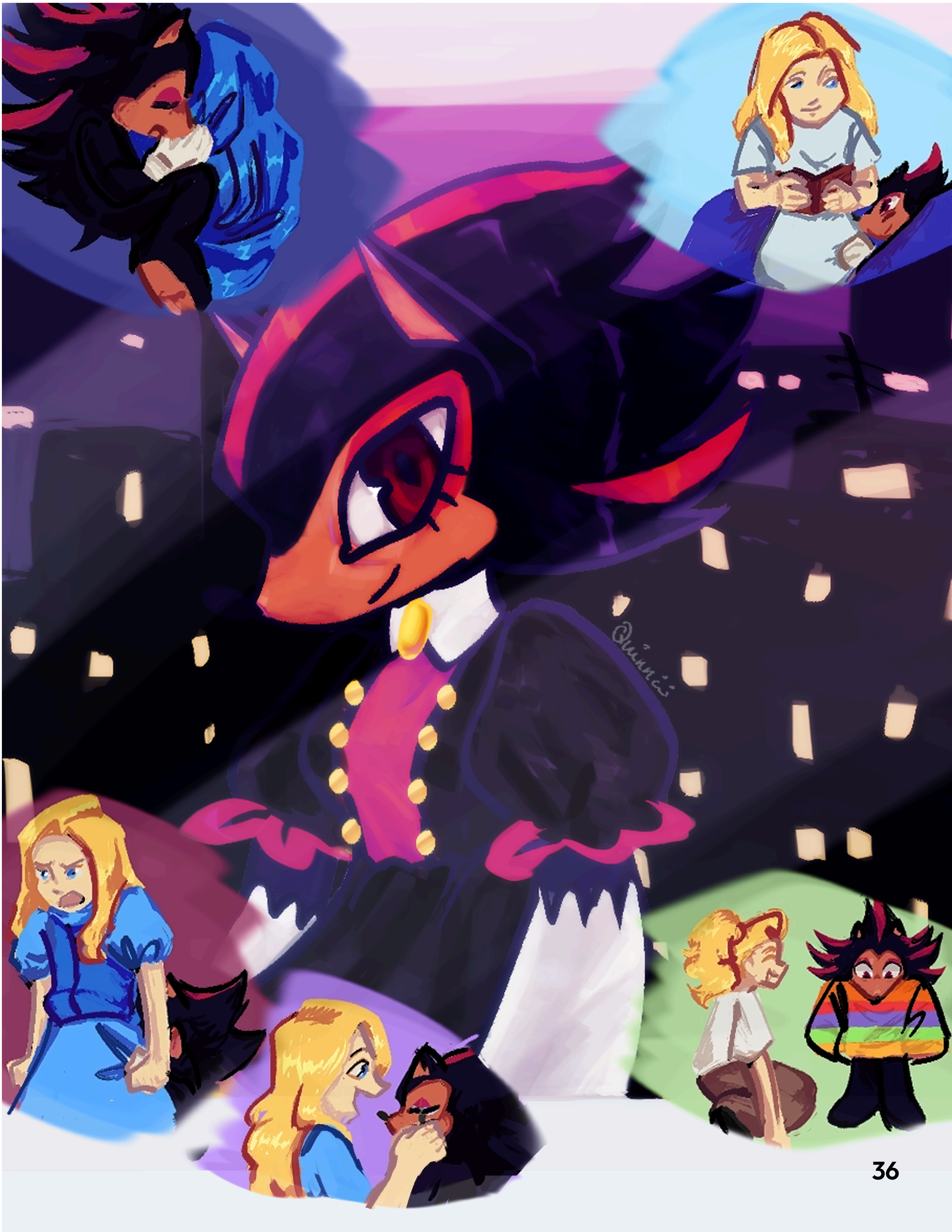
Blingee (blinguie)



Coropuchino

Shadow's Revelation

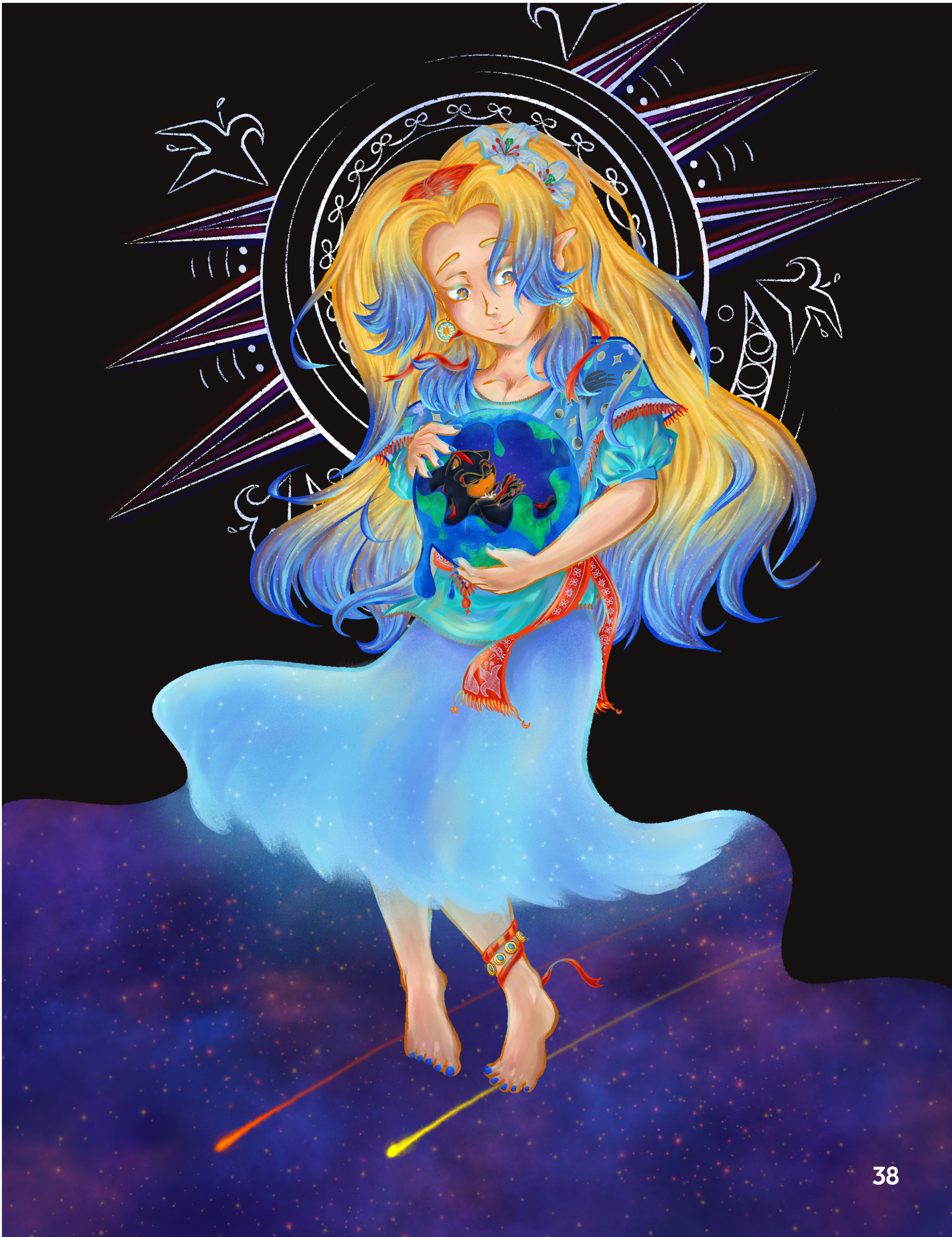
Quinn (catgirlweed)



Losttimpactt

Maria De Las Estrellitas

HybridShadowz



Her Light

By Ultimate Shiruba

Shadow was sure he was at the right address.

He raised his hand towards the door, ready to knock, but he hesitated. So much could or couldn't happen.

He went alone, in secret. As Omega would only bring trouble to something so delicate, and he didn't think Rouge would've had any helpful input herself either.

No. He had to go alone.

To satisfy a curiosity that lingered in the back of his mind.

He tracked down Maria's younger, living sister. Easier said than done.

He couldn't blame her.

With the legacy Project Shadow Gerald left behind, it only made sense that Maria's parents distanced themselves from the Robotnik legacy and lineage by changing their names...

But after learning of their existence, and finding their files, including the archived legal paperwork for name changes, he had to know... He had to meet her at least once.

Shines On

It was a humble semi-detached home in the far outskirts at the border of Spagonia, at least an hour away by Metro from the university. Brown brickwork with a few cracks here and there. Nothing glamorous. Only thing even hinting at the residents inside were a few decorations by the window and the narrow front yard of various replicas of ruins or relics of places around the world like a replica statue of the whales of Ocean Palace, or a bird bath made in the likeness of the Emerald Shrine in a Gaia Temple that's been recently cleaned and replenished with fresh water.

Clearly, Gerald's passion for archaeology wasn't snuffed out from the tragic incident of the raid.

Despite the silence, there was a deafening, suffocating air at the door.

He would likely be unwelcomed. A reminder of a painful tragedy. He was the Ultimate Lifeform, but delicate social settings were far from his forte.

He took a deep breath. It's now or never.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

As soon as his knuckles struck the door on the third round, regret washed over him. It was a foolish endeavour. Even if it would satisfy a curiosity he had, no doubt that the family didn't want to be found. His very presence may even viciously reopen old wounds.

He heard muffled voices on the other side of the door. A few voices actually. Nothing he could discern proper words from. But there were definitely people on the other side.

He heard a set of footsteps walking towards the door to answer.

If he had to bail, he could teleport out of sight before the door opened.

But cowards run... And a coward he was not.

Shadow has faced worse. Maria dying in front of him, having a near death experience falling to Earth. Even as far as facing his biological father and wiping his kind out of existence.

This however, well he at least had an idea what came next. The painful loss and grief. The possibility of death. A difficult battle he couldn't afford to lose.

He couldn't predict what would happen the moment the door swung open.

Anticipation was getting to him, he found himself shutting his eyes for a moment, as if bracing himself for danger.

The door swung open letting out a faint creak, immediately followed by silence.

Looking in front of him, his eyes moved up to meet familiar blue eyes. Before him was a middle-aged woman. Dark blonde hair, with a few slivers of silver already starting to show. She was dressed in autumn colours of orange and reds and yellows. She wore thick glasses not unlike her grandfather.

Despite her age, different clothing, hairstyle and accessories, her face was the spitting image of Maria. It was like looking into another timeline, one where she did get cured. A timeline where she made it to Earth and the ARK disaster never happened. A timeline where Maria did get reunited with her parents.

The air was tense while they stared at each other for what felt like an eternity.

"...This isn't about the time I trespassed illegally into the Gaia Temples, is it?" She asked, breaking the silence.

Shadow exhaled, struggling for a second to regain a normal breathing pattern again. He didn't know what to say. He couldn't tell whether to laugh or not. Of all the things she could have said, he wasn't expecting anything like that.

"G.U.N. didn't send you, did they?" She asked again, her voice hesitant and nervous.

Shadow shook his head.

"No." He answered. "However, I wanted to see you. You are... Maria's sister, right?"

The Ultimate Lifeform braced himself. Anticipating the door to be slammed in his face, being told to get out, or another eternity of silence.

"Oh..." She replied. "Yeah... That was her name... What of her?"

There was an awkwardness in the air. A discomfort the both of them felt palpable.

"I was made by Gerald for his research to cure her before the ARK raid happened." Shadow confessed.

There was another lengthy pause, as if Shadow unknowingly used Chaos Control to freeze that moment. But, there was a gentle breeze in the air that brushed both of them and stirred up leaves around their feet that have yet to be raked. There was the soft breathing that could be heard from the both of them just faintly. Time was still moving. Yet, it was just the two of them frozen in place.

"...I don't know if I could be of much information, or of use to you." She broke the silence. "But... If you knew them, I have some personal questions. Would you like to come in?"

The woman stepped aside of the doorway to let Shadow in, leading him to the living room.

The walls to her home were a pale golden yellow, with all sorts of decorations covering much space. He saw photos of her family, her parents, a wedding photo, and some photos of children across the walls in various frames at various stages of life.

The more they made their way

around the home, the more he saw various certificates and qualifications on the walls, along with paintings of remote places around the world. There were shelves with various knick-knacks ranging from childish arts and crafts, to souvenirs from various countries, to a handful of rock specimens and fossils.

There was a couch, with a large wooden coffee table that was covered in stains, scratches, and various papers. A couple used mugs still sat on it from that morning.

“Take a seat.” She instructed.

Shadow remained standing, as he preferred to.

“Sit!” She commanded in a stricter mother-tone.

Shadow obliged, taken off-guard by such a command.

“Tea or coffee?” She asked, her tone of voice shifting once again to someone welcoming and hospitable, albeit with some icy undertones still noticeable. “I think I also have some teacakes in the fridge. Sorry about the mess, I wasn’t expecting someone to visit so I haven’t cleaned up yet.”

“... Do you have coffee beans?” Shadow asked.

“Sorry, I only have pre-ground coffee.” She answered. “I can hand you an open bag and a spoon if you want?”

“Not interested.” Shadow declined. “If it’s not crunchy it’s not my preference.”

The woman stifled a laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Shadow asked.

“Well... this entire situation.” She answered, honestly. “It’s strange, isn’t it? The last relic of my sister, the research that got her killed no less, is not only in my house, but he eats coffee beans straight? Compared to my mundane, quiet life, that certainly is a strange oddity, isn’t it?”

She continued to laugh as she readied herself some Spagonian Breakfast Tea and seated herself across from him, placing a plate of half-eaten teacake

"Now... I know you are technically a guest, but I am the one with questions." She said, stirring her tea before taking a sip and placing it down on its saucer. "First, what is your reason to be here? I am aware of your status as an agent, and I read the Declassified Files of Project Shadow after that old relic of a space colony almost killed everyone. I know who you are, Shadow. If you aren't here as a G.U.N. agent to arrest me for my past expeditions to restricted sites like the Temples of Gaia, why are you here?"

Shadow didn't have an immediate answer. Frankly, he didn't really know himself what compelled him beyond simply that she was one of the last living relatives of Maria that wasn't the Doctor's side of the family.

He just knew that he had to meet her at least once, even if it was to end bitterly or sour.

The older woman's eyes narrowed a little as she fixed her gaze. She stared right into his eyes, and right through him.

"It's about her, isn't it?" She asked.

"It's just... you look almost exactly like her..." Shadow confessed, internally cursing himself for how quickly he let such thoughts slip off his tongue.

"Yeah, like I didn't hear that constantly growing up!" She snapped, before taking a deep breath, looking away for a moment, and having another sip of tea.

"Sorry," She apologised. "It's just... I am not Maria. I never really knew her personally. I was only a baby when it all happened. My earliest memory was long after she was sent to her death in Space. I didn't even remember her funeral. My parents never forgave grandpa for what he did. I know NIDS doesn't have a cure, but at least we would have been able to say goodbye in-person!"

She chuckled a little as she continued. It was a forced laugh.

"It's funny..." She continued. "My parents did everything they could to distance us from grandpa and his legacy. Even to the point of changing the family name. Then of course cousin Ivo just had to do the opposite of that... Yet, despite that... It was like my whole life I was... haunted by her. Being told how much I looked just like her. How much I should aspire to be like her... I know it was probably to keep her memory alive, but I had no memories of her... I never tried to be like her. I just followed my father's footsteps in his passion for Archaeology and I am just a humble teacher at Spagonia University. I thought I could put all those times I was haunted by someone I never knew behind me. And then you turned up. The living research that got her killed."

Shadow flinched as she said that.

The woman's voice barely hiding years of bitterness and resentment.

"I... I'm sorry..." Shadow choked out, sincerely.

The woman took in a deep breath again, and breathed out slowly, steadying herself once more.

"It’s just... a sore spot for me. You weren't to know the drama that happened at my end of things." She replied, her voice calmer and softer once more. "You were made because grandpa was so desperate to cure her. You asked to be born just as much as she asked to die."

After taking another sip, she reached to the table for a slice of cake, taking a small bite.

"If you aren't going to help yourself..." She muttered as she did.

"How much do you know of Project Shadow?" He asked.

"Only what was declassified by G.U.N. Mainly that you were the product of such research, that there was a raid, and that she was killed." She replied. "Save for that, not much."

Shadow reached over and took a small slice of cake himself, taking a bite. It was stale, sweet, and certainly not his preference, especially not without coffee beans to accompany it.

"She was one of the first faces I saw when I first awoke on the Space Colony ARK." Shadow explained. "The ARK's low gravity kept her condition in remission. Most days you wouldn't have known she was terminally ill. I wanted the research to succeed. There were so many nights that we both stared down at the Earth from space, wishing to go down there together."

The woman laughed again, this time a more genuine laugh.

"I used to often think about what could have been. If she wasn't sick. If she was cured. If we grew up together, would my life be that different?" She commented, before pausing to take another bite of cake. "What was she like? Maria? Was she just like how I kept being told about her? Or was she just as flawed as I am?"

Shadow didn't answer immediately. He carefully considered his choice of words.

"... She was the most selfless person I had ever known." He finally answered. "Despite her condition and her illness, she always managed to keep smiling and remained hopeful. I heard the last words she ever said. She begged me, made me promise that for all the people down here, to protect them and give them a chance to be happy. She made me promise that with her dying breath, as she sacrificed herself to save my life. She pleaded for the good of humanity as they put a bullet in her! That promise is what I try to uphold everywhere I go. She was the one who named me, wanting me to be someone who can show others where the light shines. Despite how dire her situation was, she always managed to smile and bring happiness to everyone she knew. Commander Tower was like a brother to her... She was a sister to me... She was the reason for my existence!"

The knickknacks in the room trembled slightly with his words. Shadow didn’t mean to be so loud, especially not in a place that wasn’t his house.

"The only flaw she had." Shadow continued, more quietly. "Was that her hopes and dreams were for nothing in the end... That and... Sometimes I wondered how much of her smile had to be forced. How much she had to fight her own condition so people wouldn't be sad for her. She liked the view up there, but she missed her family. She even told me she missed you most of all."

The woman gasped a little. Her eyes widened slightly.

Not a reality-shattering realisation, but clearly shaken by the information given to her.

"I was only a baby then." She mumbled, before correcting her volume to an easier level to hear. "I would have been nothing more than a lot of whining and responsibilities."

"That didn't matter to her." The

Ultimate Lifeform continued. "She wanted to grow up with you."

She blinked a few times. Behind the thick glasses some tears began to trickle down her face.

“I never knew she thought that of me...” She choked out.

"You weren't to know these things either." Shadow replied. "You never got to know her personally. Sometimes, I still feel responsible for everything that happened that day. I wished there was a way things could have been different."

The woman wiped some of the tears from her face, taking another small slice of cake from the table.

"I guess that's the nature of tragedy. Even with nobody at fault, people can still suffer from it all." She replied. "I suppose someone powerful enough to help protect this world alongside other legendary heroes means that this all wasn't for nothing, right? You said that her illness was the reason you ended up being made, so at least some good came of this mess, though I suppose that doesn't make it easier, does it?"

Shadow shook his head.

She finished her cup of tea and placed it down.

“... I had so much anger and resentment towards this whole situation. Towards grandpa. Towards you. Towards my family. Towards her...” She continued. “I have no means to prove such things, but I know in my heart that you are telling the truth. I feel so foolish for holding on to such things for so long, but I lived most of my life in the shadow of a dead person... Being compared to her... It’s hard to let that go.”

As she blinked, a few more fresh tears fell down her face.

While any other day, Shadow wouldn’t have had the best idea on how to handle the situation, he felt something stir within him that pushed him to action.

Quickly getting up from his seat, he grabbed her and held her close in a hug, letting her cry on his shoulder.

"Maria told me that without a shadow, you can't ever find the light. If you were in her shadow, then in a strange way, her light is still being carried on."

“You don’t know anything about me.” She replied, making no effort to push him away as her own arms wrapped around him.

“I am willing to learn.” The Ultimate Lifeform retorted without missing a beat, letting go and pulling his chair closer to her before seating himself again. “And if you have the time, use as much as you need.”

A couple hours passed as she tried to explain more about her life to him. Apparently, she was a mother of two children who have since moved out. She likes to live a humble life in her little home, and in her free time, she likes to learn some of the more advanced cooking techniques of Spagonian culture.

"Though I will admit." She continued. "I must confess that it wasn't archaeology that was my main passion. I loved exploring ruins and experiencing the world, even the parts of the world isolated from civilization. I loved the sights, the sounds and smells. I wanted to see it all. But I found my true passion when I was asked to give a lecture at a local college about the desert ruins of Soleanna. I remember feeling so nervous, but when I started talking, I felt something light up within me. I saw the faces of the students fixate on my words and visual aids. Sharing my passion with a new generation. My true calling was being a teacher, it seemed. Compared to the family line, I suppose it's not that much. I am not quite as much of an expert, not someone like Professor Pickle, but I help my students understand the material as best I can. Despite everything that's happened, I don't regret where I am in life... Do you think she would like the path I took in life or the sort of person I grew up to be?"

While Shadow couldn’t speak on Maria’s behalf, he knew without a doubt how to answer that question.

“She would just be happy to know that you are living a life you wanted to live, doing what you love, and finding happiness.” He answered. “And I know she would have loved to be an aunt.”

The woman let out a chuckle.

“It’s strange... You look nothing like her, yet... right now... despite never knowing her... it feels like if I close my eyes, she’s right here next to me...”

"Gerald said he created me with a soul based off of Maria. But I am nothing like her, either. And that's ok. It's what made her special, but makes us unique."

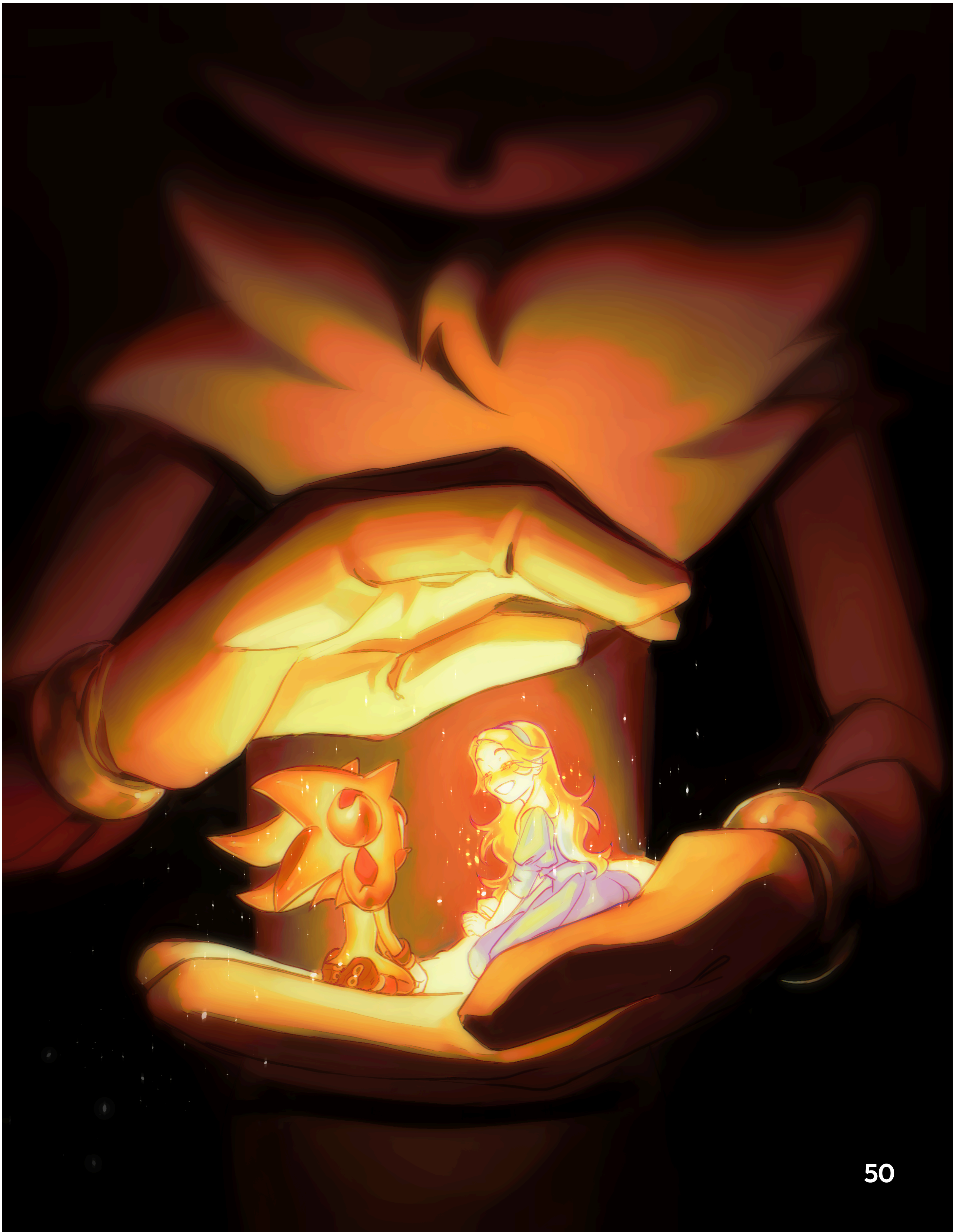
She began to laugh even harder. She was holding her stomach a little as she did as her face became more radiant, a stark contrast to the cold entrance he got a few hours ago.

“I wondered why you came here when I saw you at the door.” She eventually continued after she settled down again. “But now, I am wondering why you didn’t come sooner. You’re quite a character, Shadow. But... I am glad you decided to visit. I at least have a bit of closure of what she was like from someone who wasn't my parents... I guess... You're the closest connection I could have had with her. But... still, what was your specific reason?”

"I don't know why." He continued. "But I know... that I wanted to meet the rest of her family at least once."

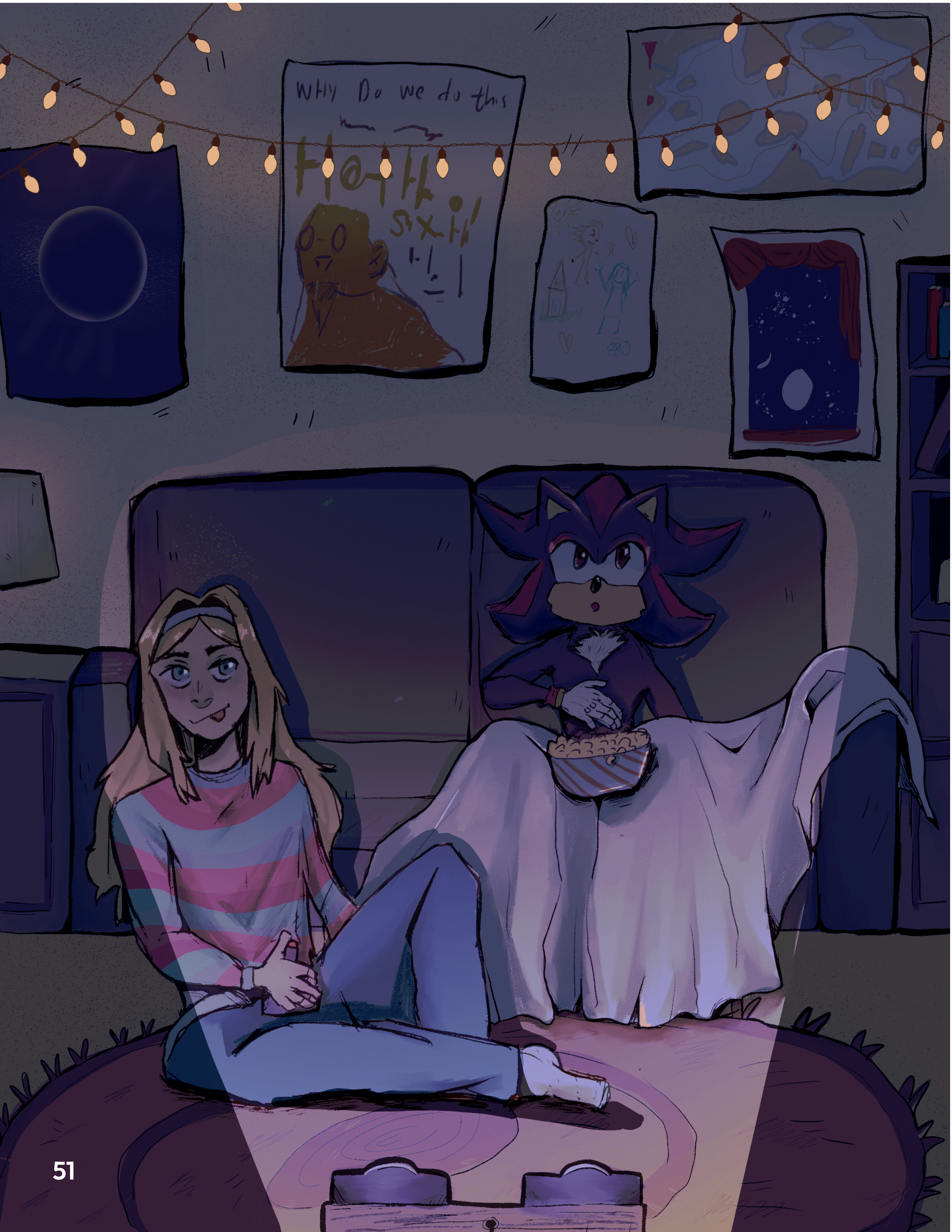
“I think I know why you came here...” She answered for him. “So, you say that she believed without a shadow, you can’t find the light. Well... I can tell you came here hoping to find her light shining on through me. But... It seems you were mistaken. Because, even though I never knew her, if she was what you say, I can see the plain as day... Her light is shining on through you.”

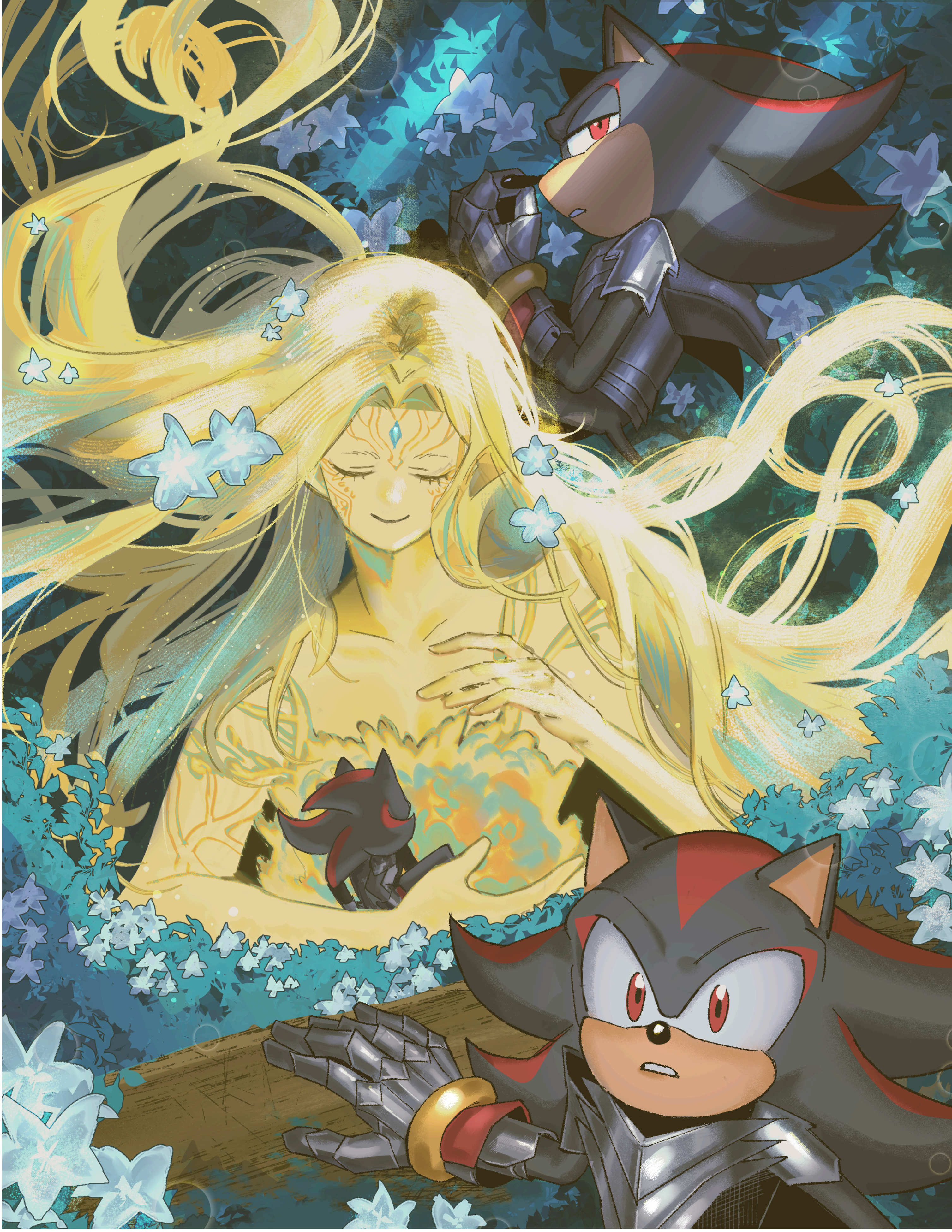
Nopedog



Game Night

Kira (Rilcornet)

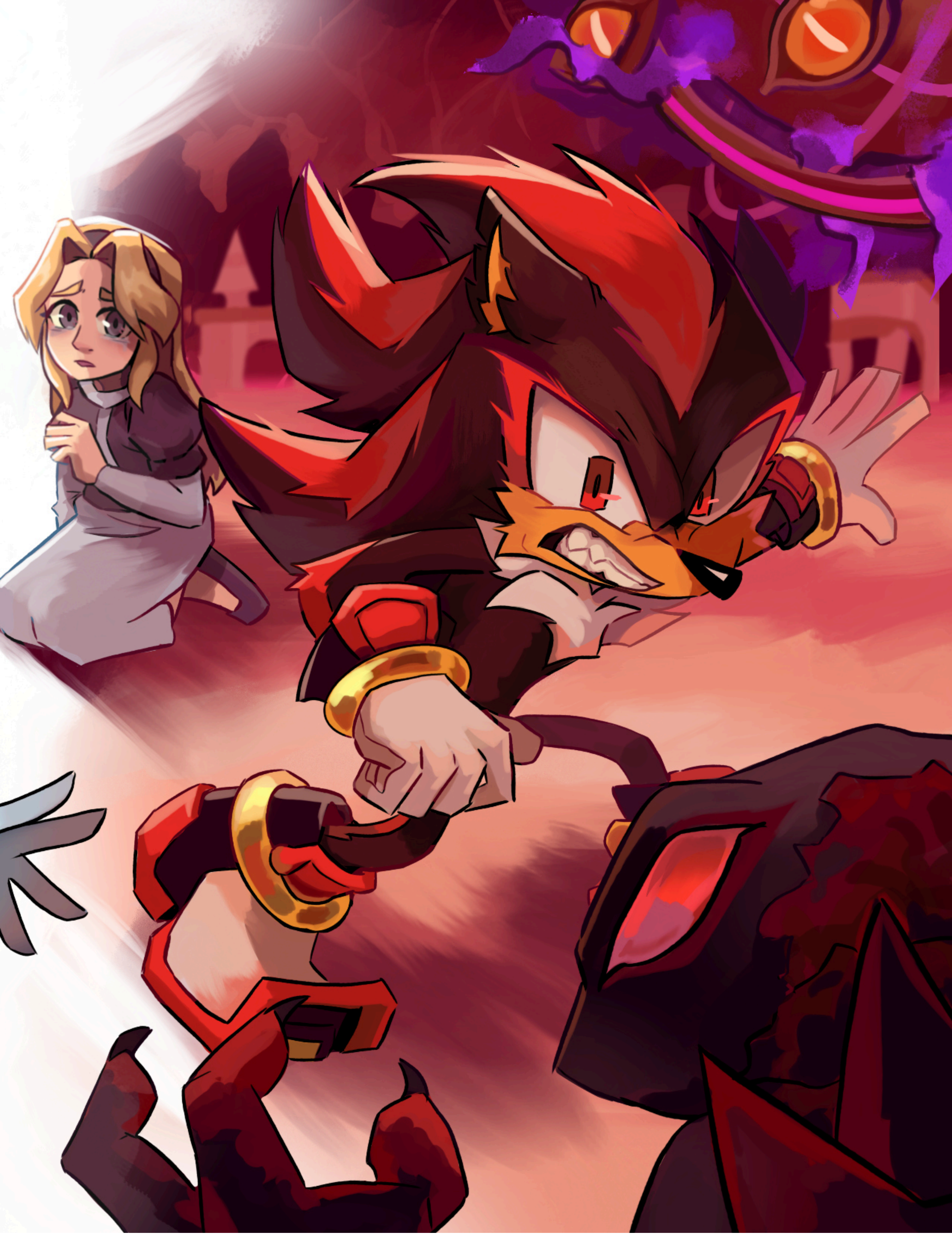

WHY Do we do this
sixth!



His Sanctuary

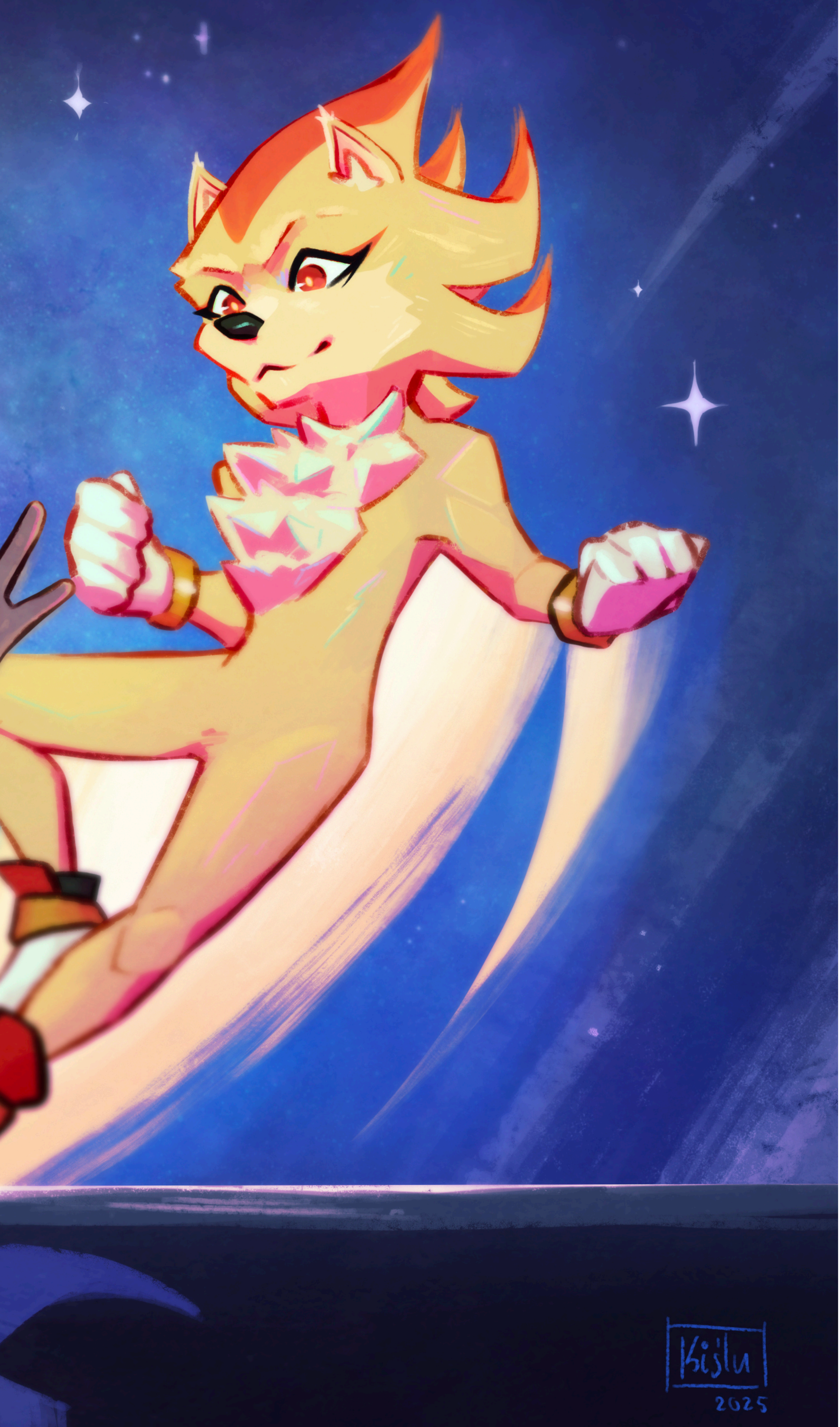
Ken

Nanmeo



If only she could see you now

Kiślu (kislurysuje)



The World We Knew

TikkTukk

Spring After All

By Windii

A display window in a certain store in Mission Street.

A pair of vivid sky-blue shoes, exuding a somewhat mature aura.

At that moment... what did he see in them?

And why did he buy them?

Since then, they have been there to greet Shadow on the shelf directly in front of the bed in the Mission Street apartment whenever he chose to stay the night there.

The near-empty, colorless apartment, consisting only of the most basic necessities and furnishing, was given a splash of pleasant sky-blues by this sole personal belonging out in the open. Yet, too small to fit him, their only purpose so far has been sitting on that shelf, a spot he could not possibly overlook.

Why did he buy them?

He did recognize it as an irrational decision, of course, but he was certain it was not spurred by the wintery wonderland spirit. After all, wouldn't this room be garnished from head to toe in gaudy and superficial trinkets by now?

Now he finds himself sitting there in a meek position, hugging his knees, staring back at a dainty pair of footwear until his eyelids managed to grow too fatigued to stay up, internally repeating questions no one was around to answer.

In that instant, he could have sworn the shoes were looking at him and comforting him.

It has been so long. How much does he still remember?

Come to think of it, just recently was the anniversary of the ARK incident. A modest meeting in memory of it was organized by Abraham Tower, some of his surviving family members and Victoria in attendance. At his behest, on Shadow's side, Rouge, Omega and Sage, who had begun mingling with Tower and Tori for some reason or another, were also invited. The mood was stoic, sorrowful. Not so much a wistful recounting of "the good old days"—they would need to be "good" days for such a thing to be possible—but more so an opportunity to connect, observe the past with the wisdom of hindsight, and contemplate where they're supposed to go from here.

"Soon there won't be a lot of us left who remember," Tower said.

"Even now, some of those who yet remember do not appear to do so with any concessions made for accuracy," Sage replied. She comprehended, on some level, that the solemn atmosphere and the various relationships unfolding before her was the culmination of the Robotnik family baggage stretching all the way back to her great-grandfather's time. The source of how things are the way they are; an awful and unusual tragedy where everyone involved can be said to have been both the culprit and the victim. Contradictory eyewitness accounts, incomplete surviving evidence, infinite what-if scenarios for what could have "really" happened. And now they are all here grieving, attempting to reconcile and come to grips with it all.

"Still..." Tower turned his gaze toward Omega and Rouge exchanging barbs and banter, then at Tori and Shadow observing a mildly decorated corner of the room with a photo of his late parents—"shrine," he calls it. Tori appeared to form a praying gesture in front of it. "I feel it is undeniable that she continues to have an effect on us even at this moment, for better or worse. In the first place, she is the reason we are gathered here in this room today. I would not have known Shadow or the rest of you otherwise. However big or small, she has influenced even those who never knew her. Perhaps the same will be true for the ones who will come after we, too, are gone..."

"How astute, Abe," Rouge quipped, small drinking glass in hand. "The way you describe her, she may as well be a little ghost moving back and forth, checking in on us now and then. Well, I guess we can decide for ourselves how that's supposed to affect who we are and what we do."

His eyes snapped open once more.

The shoes were still there.

So, did that influence extend to their purchase?

He wasn't sure.

But what he did know is he never quite stopped seeing her in everything.

Maria Robotnik. A girl from old and distant memories still clinging to him like frigid winter air he lets in from a perpetually cracked window each night.

Her presence so completely overwhelming he subconsciously associates even the most tangentially related objects, ideas and natural phenomena with her. Flowers, the sky, the ocean, the stars. Kindness, hope, good table manners.

A pair of shoes at a display window.

Why?

Every living being encounters something and changes because of it.

Surely, then, that means there will always be a certain something, certain someone from whom the roots spread to begin with.

Despite his every effort to make a clean break with his bitter, mind-boggling past, she continues to color his outlook on the world, serve as the bridge that connects him with other people, and inform his every decision in the present.

Even if it was as mundane as choosing clothing items in a store.

And if everything about his background was full of pain, confusion and lies, she was the one untainted, beloved thing in it he insisted on keeping.

She was still so strangely vivid in his mind.

The songs she sang to him, the tales she told him. Her voluminous hair that seemed to have all of the world's sunlight trapped in every strand. The warm and inviting blues of her dress, the little creases in her hairband, the long eyelashes, the mild gloss on her lips. The eyes that appeared to be a pair of galaxies all their own. The infinite capacity for love and understanding. The wish that would end up ensuring the planet's future happiness forevermore. All things that would only become more irreplaceably precious to him over time.

The very person that figuratively—no, rather literally—gave him life. The one who saw him as a living being before he was a weapon or syringe. The one who sacrificed herself to send him to Earth, not so he could live, but so he had a chance to be truly alive. How could he ever separate that from who he is?

His head was in his hands.

The world became so much smaller once the light in those two galaxies ceased to shine.

It wasn't fair that he and everyone else he has met gets to live their life and figure out their place in the world and she doesn't.

I left you there.

A single tear managed to squeeze out of his eyes as he pondered. It was freezing cold.

He wasn't sure why he was out at Mission Street again, let alone why he was holding a paper bag with the shoes in them, standing stiff as a plank in one place.

To return them? He was too overcome with sheer unfounded adrenaline while buying them to care where the store was or what it was called.

To throw them out? That thought terrified him more than any other.

On a wintry day like today, not quite festive and not quite ordinary, with crowds of people around him hastily moving back and forth, he was feeling feelings that made no sense, doing things that made no sense.

Like staring blankly at the shoes in his bag, as if trying to reach some grand revelation and understand everything.

It didn't matter whether he was in his apartment or out on the streets now.

Everything was becoming too much.

This winter has gone on too long.

The snowflakes landing on him were prickly, the scarf and coat he put on were suffocating, and he was now overcome with an overwhelming sensation that he was being buried alive in piles of snow with no way to get out or say anything or breathe. At the same time, he felt as though any miniscule move or jerk from some passerby would make him vomit a grotesque mixture of bile and blood and collapse on the spot.

How was he supposed to keep moving like this?

It wasn't fair that everyone else could walk wherever they wanted without a care in the world.

And he was only souring the cheery mood by being there.

Has he truly done anything to repay her, honor her memory, and positively influence others based on the ideals and teachings he received from her?

He never really did anything of note, he thought.

I abandoned you.

There was truly nothing that could save him from his slump. No answer that could solve his every dilemma.

No reason behind these shoes.

He should have made this all go away.

His internal rampage has thus continued until...

"Heh, famous last words! You just go ahead and try."

That's Sonic's voice. Since when did he—

Shadow sharply turned his head to

the side of the light source that was suddenly hitting him.

Before he knew it, a massive LED panel was there. The camera showed close-ups of Sonic, Tails, Knuckles and Amy, each with a microphone and all of them besides Knuckles smiling. An interview segment? Why was this on the big screen?

They were likely discussing something meaningless that was none of his business. But for some reason, he stayed put and continued watching.

"Look, you guys either believe me or you don't," Knuckles pouted, his arms folded. "I know I'm up for it, and that's good enough for me."

"Yeah, I bet." Sonic playfully rolled his eyes. "Next question!"

The camera switched to the interviewee, revealed to be Rouge. She seemed positively delighted by the scene.

"What do you all think of Shadow?"

His eyebrow raised somewhat. Just as he decided none of this concerned him, Sonic and his buddies are talking about him on a giant screen for all to see. It's not like he was doing anything remotely productive at that moment anyway. Give it here.

"Shadow is sweet!" Amy exclaimed. "He really tries hard for those he cares about, despite what he says. You know, he actually offered me two discount tickets for those limited-edition soft serve ice cream flavors when I lost that giveaway. I don't even know how he got them, but that meant a lot. I even let him have the other flavor. We didn't talk much then, though, so I'm not sure what he thought of it..."

Come to think of it, he does remember trying that ice cream.

...It wasn't bad.

"It's true!" Tails chimed in. "Shadow has a pure heart and strives to protect what's important, no matter if he gets lost or hurt. He's gone through a lot of hardship and pain in his life, but he keeps going. I hope to become even half as strong as him... oh, and Sonic of course!" He laughed awkwardly.

Hmph. Don't impose your own preconceived notions on me.

"Let's not forget some of that pain was taken out on you, too," Knuckles grumbled. "Just an off-putting snob is what he is. Always blabbing about how he's so ultimate and so above us and our 'pointless' activities. He needs to be knocked down a few pegs and stop making his hang-ups everyone else's problem. Frankly, I don't see the appeal."

Shadow's frown grew more pronounced. The same echidna that let his emotions get the better of him on multiple occasions and was one-upped not just by the Doctor but his AI, acting like his life coach? He should know his place.

"Well, he did also make sure Sonic's last few birthdays were safe and free of the doc's interference," Rouge pointed out. "The ice cream anecdote Amy just described is certainly not out of left field. I wouldn't put it past him quietly making sure no one's left feeling bad. Anyway, if you had the chance, where would you want to hang out with him?"

"I'd take him out shopping," Amy said, half in an attempt to keep the flow of the conversation. You know that brand new Petite Cleaner they've been showing on TV? Palm-sized, yet just as capable as any average vacuum cleaner. And it can get to those hard-to-reach spots easily! A perfectionist like him who needs everything to be spick-and-span would love it."

"Shadow likes black coffee, doesn't he?" Tails asked. "Here's the thing: I've never seen him drink it! It seems he won't drink just any coffee; he won't even look at it if it's not sourced from the finest ingredients on Earth. I don't know if I'd be able to tell even if my textbooks or microscopes could, to be honest. His palate seems to be developed to handle the most sophisticated smells and flavors. I bet he could precisely describe the differences between the makeups of every mint candy in the world!"

"Oh, good point! He can have his coffee and candies when I take him to the library with me. They allow snacks in there," Amy said, inadvertently forming a heart shape with her hands.

"The library?" Both Knuckles and Rouge almost asked in unison. "Uh, I mean, I thought that was more Tails's thing."

"Hey, I read books too, guys!" she huffed. "Even if I got lost in my own world reading about a hero and a heroine going on adventures, I just know he'd just let me be without rolling his eyes or acting smug."

Sonic gave a mild chuckle. It almost seemed as though he was about to say something, only to look the other way.

Shadow stayed silent.

Tails was up next. "I'd want to play sports with him!"

"Sports?" Both Knuckles and Amy almost asked in unison. "I mean... what kinda sports?"

"Oh, anything! Soccer, basketball... Shadow seems like a jack-of-all-trades, and I think I could grow stronger if he could teach me techniques. Maybe we could even gather nine players and play baseball together! I do need to keep myself in shape in-between tinkering and computers..."

Hmph. For that matter, he wasn't their coach either. They can play by themselves.

Next was Knuckles. "I wanna have a good one-on-one brawl with him with none of that Chaos or limiter nonsense. I know you're watching this, Shadow!" He grabbed the microphone in front of him, staring at what he was hoping to be Shadow at the other end of his gaze. He wasn't quite making it.

"If you truly have the guts, come at me fair and square! Then we can talk about who's the ultimate!" he barked as the screeching reverb and panicked yells of "You're messing up the volume levels!" blared across the room.

Shadow remained unmoved.

"What about you, Sonic? What do you think?"

The spotlight was on him now. Sonic took a moment to think of his response. Then he smiled. "He's a good playmate." There was a certain sense of fondness in his tone. "I can always be sure he'll entertain me whenever I find him. I want him to challenge my limits and show me the sights I've never seen. I want my mind to transcend my flesh in our speed."

The defiant look he formed on his face as he spoke made his profile dazzling and handsome.

...Hmph.

Everyone else in the room could only stare speechless at him. That is, until Knuckles eventually broke the silence.

"That sounds like I'm not good enough for you, Sonic. Whatever. I bet this guy just can't handle my manliness."

"Oh my, you do sound like the type of man I'd like to handle," Rouge teased.

"..What?"

Laughter exploded within the room, drowning out the increasingly bewildered "No, seriously, what?" that followed.

Ridiculous. Why was he still watching this?

What a waste of time. Shadow turned away from the panel, fully ready to leave when...

"You haven't said a thing yet, Maria."

...?!

He turned back around just as quickly. Unbelievable. A close-up of Maria, looking just as ethereally beautiful as he remembered her, revealed to have been sitting there with all of them in that room just slightly off-screen the entire time.

He stared intently now, not with boredom or indignance like he had been, too transfixed to check if there was anyone in the crowd watching the same thing he did. He wasn't even sure if he cared how or why this was happening. He could only be a witness to it.

Tails's face reddened almost instantaneously. "Oh, sorry... We got a little too into that. How long have we been talking?"

Maria gave a small laugh. It was that same fluttery, sweet tone he knew so well. "Oh, I was just so engrossed in you guys' stories and conversations. I'm so happy Shadow has made such good friends."

They're not my—

Everyone in the room looked at each other nervously. "Well... I think you might be right," Sonic grinned.

"Hey, you knew Shadow before any of us did," Tails remembered. "What was he like from your point of view? You both lived on the world's most advanced space colony! I'm kinda envious..."

"Yeah, we've all been there once!" Amy added. "The view from the observation deck was so lovely! I wondered if it was in any way similar to the worlds Sonic always sees. What kind of world did you and Shadow see?"

"Has he gotten any tougher since then?" Knuckles asked. "You know, if only all those experiences made him wiser. Now he's just thick-headed." He was only half-joking.

Sonic turned towards her. "Why don't we all let her do the talking so we can find out?"

All the attention was on her now. For a short while, she stayed silent and maintained a distant look, as if trying to recall something from long ago. Eventually, that was followed by a delicate, wistful smile perking up on her lips.

Even without a single word yet spoken, that sight alone, comparable to crisp and clear footage of a butterfly emerging from its cocoon, was utterly mesmerizing.

And he was now basking in it.

"I had a weak body since birth and eventually had to live away from Earth's pathogens and stay close to the research labs. But I wasn't worried. I had the highest privilege of being surrounded by kindness and compassion from Grandfather and the researchers... most of them, while living aboard the pinnacle of modern human technology. There was Abe, that lovable rascal. And before long, there was Shadow. He was... is... my dearest friend."

...

"It was like I was living out a classic sci-fi movie of my wildest dreams. A living creature born of alien DNA, in the form of a hedgehog! He came out into the world before my very eyes, and I thought it was absolutely amazing. I knew I had to show him around and teach him everything I knew right away. He would follow me around thereafter, like a baby duckling would its mother, often without saying a word. Even Grandfather was shocked by how quickly we hit it off. He even claimed our kind of relationship had no precedent."

His own brain was working overtime now, trying to recall some of this information. He definitely remembered that conversation taking place.

He also remembered it was her voice that he heard most clearly, the first voice that he was actively aware was speaking to him, at a time when he was not certain if he himself even had the capacity for thought or speech. That voice was even singing to him from time to time.

It was such a pleasant song, too. The first sounds he registered as "pleasant" in his mind.

"I loved his cool, curvy spikes. I loved his voice in those rare, special moments when he did speak at length, so low and dark and yet always filled with that touch of anxiety. It was almost adorable how often he had that frown on his face," she said as she attempted to imitate the exact expression she recalled. This elicited a few laughs from the group. "He was sulky and conflicted a lot of the time, but he was incredibly gentle despite it all. He listened to my stories and carried me around the ARK when I wasn't physically able to get around. He was so fast, too... I wanted him to know, every step of the way, that he was going to be something wonderful someday. A shadow that shows us where the light is..."

The camera briefly shifted to Sonic and the rest. Some of them had their mouths agape. A handful were ever so slightly teary-eyed.

Maria's own eyes appeared to be getting moist as well.

Shadow was staring too attentively to care if his were too.

"I lived a beautiful life on the ARK. I was happy just living with him and Grandfather. I would not trade the time I spent with them for anything."

I was happy with you too.

He understood now that all of his most precious memories, the ones he still recalled as if they were recent, were spent on that observation deck with her. A tranquil sanctuary where time did not exist, where it did not matter if he was the ultimate life form or she was the ordinary frail girl—they were merely two specks in the vast ocean of stars that surrounded them. The place where he frequently dozed off on her lap, despite fundamentally not needing sleep like most creatures to stay alert and maintain energy, and dreamed of them traveling through the cosmos or treading the lush environments on Earth based on those stories she told him.

Their life on the ARK was a beautiful bedtime story in itself. And so it could not last.

And still, despite facing such a gruesome fate, her eyes had never looked brighter as she prioritized his safety above hers, as she pleaded for the happiness of the same humans who were killing her. Make their wishes come true. You were born for that purpose. You're like a shadow that always watches over us.

No one else will ever be this kind. No one else will ever be this hopeful.

Certainly not him.

Was it all worth it in the end?

"How are you, Shadow?"

With a blink, he looked up. The sight made his eyes widen even more than they did earlier.

There she was, on that massive screen, staring directly at him, those few words addressing him right then and there. He felt so small, buck naked and unraveled in her gaze, but most of all he felt really and truly seen.

But it's not judgment or disappointment that he sees in those eyes.

"You must have been so sad for so long. I hope you have found something to love."

Her tone is so warm and understanding. It was as if that pile of snow he was buried in earlier was melting away, like he found a cozy cabin with a fireplace in the middle of the woods where he'd only known the biting snow and the bitter cold his entire life. He fought every urge to drop to his knees, hold his head and wail as loudly as he physically could, afraid that all of this would be gone in an instant. It really has been so hard.

"There is still so much kindness and hope in this world. Please don't ever let yourself believe it was not worth it."

Before he knew it, she was standing right before him now. In the flesh. Her face had a healthy and vibrant splash of peach to it; very unlike the sickly pale he'd come to associate her with. It was almost as if just being here on Earth, in the company of Sonic and his buddies, was healing her... whether she truly was or not.

He could not speak. There was too much to say and at the same time not enough. In all honestly, no words could succinctly describe what he was feeling or what he has been doing. Some kind of small miracle was happening in the middle of the street and all he could do was watch it unfold.

Then her arms were wrapped around him.

"And thank you... for helping me walk again."

Slowly, very slowly, he returned that embrace, allowing himself to be fully enveloped by it.

"I'm glad they fit, Maria."

In that moment, he could have sworn he caught a glimpse of Sonic from the corner of his eye, grinning and giving a thumbs up.

When he came to, he was alone on that street. The screen was showing something else now.

His paper bag felt lighter.

Was it a dream? An optical illusion? A cruel, tasteless prank on the part of Sonic and company? He wasn't certain.

But he was sure that the big, heavy tear drops flooding out of eyes, in spite of his otherwise stoic expression, were warmer than anything he had shed before.

Ah. Of course. Spring has come and now the snow is melting.

He let a smile creep in as he wiped his eyes. With an inexplicably renewed energy and drive, he marched on with a confident stride.

Now that he thought about it, it was about time that he started subtracting those layers of clothing. He also made a mental note to check that library soon. And to begin with, there had to be a place somewhere on this planet that roasted the ultimate coffee beans. That's the new Earth landmark he swore to find next, with this fresh season on the horizon. If nothing else was worth it, let this be that.

His mind was racing with thoughts and ideas. No longer stagnating in a fog of nihilism and uncertainty, he knew exactly what to do this time.

And there was one thing more...

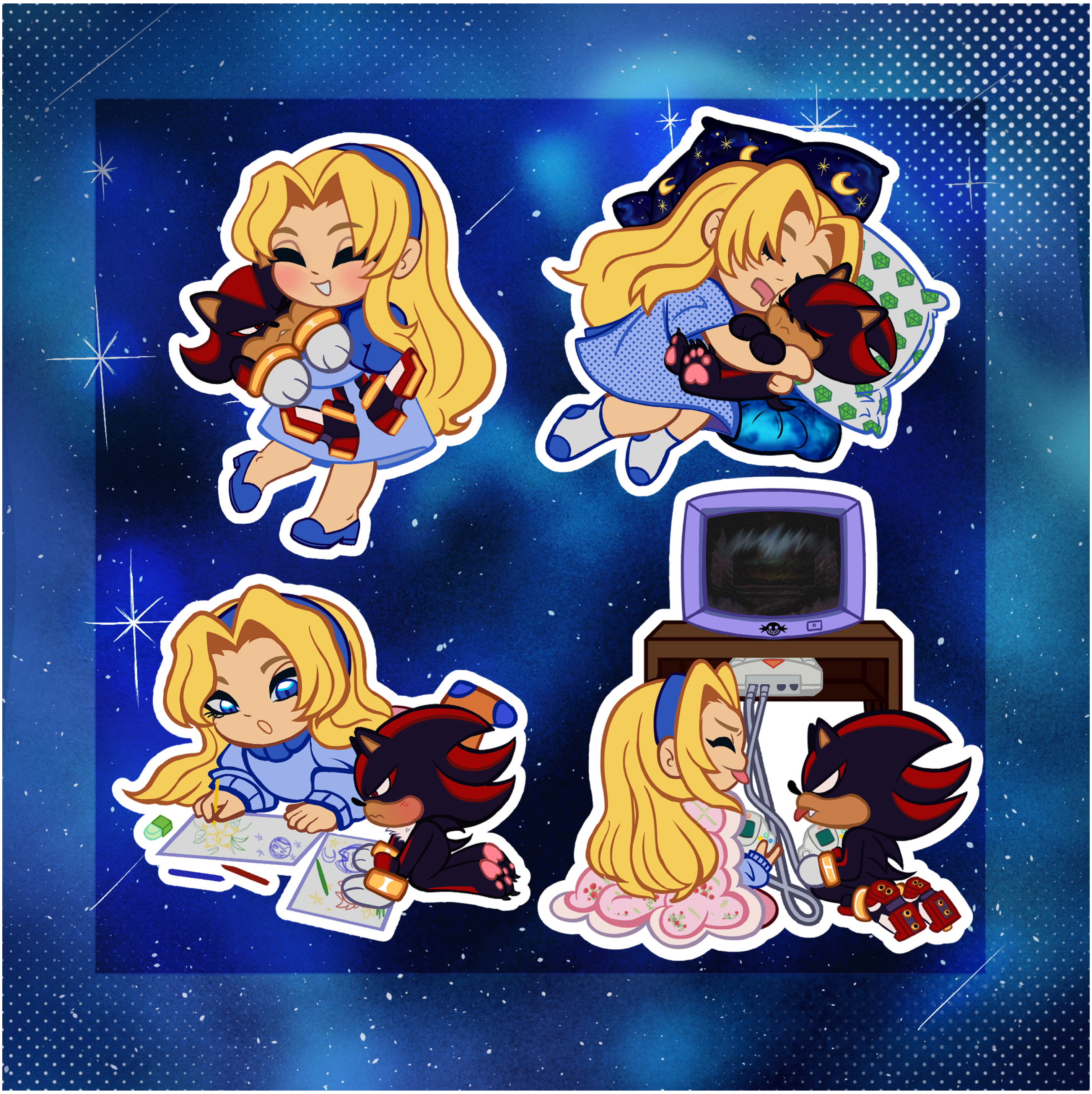
"Howdy! How may I help you?"

"I'd like to take a look at the Petite Cleaner."

Printables

By Nimue (Ribbunskull)

Scan the QR code or click the link below:
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/13H1W7Knib91OsoLGVfQ_z9L8INC3VcNJ



Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank everyone who participated and waited patiently to see this project come to life. We are really grateful for your work and your presence. Thank you to our beautiful dear readers who supported this zine, we hope you enjoyed it and was able to share a bit of your love of Shadow and Maria with everyone. Thank you!